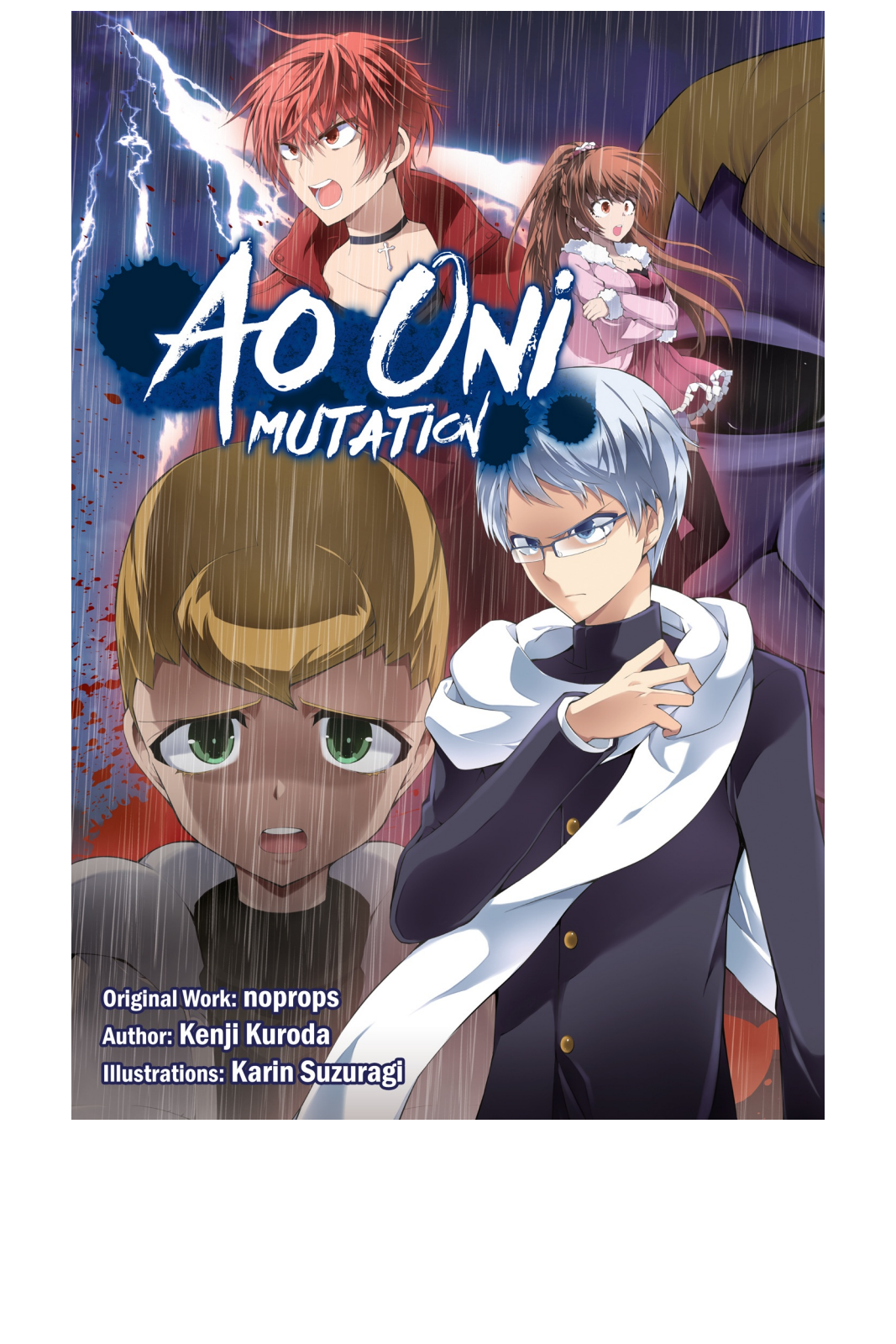


Ao Oni: Mutation

Kenji Kuroda

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



AO UNI

MUTATION

Original Work: noprops

Author: Kenji Kuroda

Illustrations: Karin Suzuragi



Illustration by Kazin Suzuragi

HIROSHI

The smartest kid in class. Always wears his glasses and is very academically gifted. He is a bit of a loner, but he has some close friends. He believes anything is possible, a character sense—or at least he did until he started with Shun and the gang began to make him question everything.

ANNA

The class president and Shun's secret crush. Lost both of her parents in an accident at the end of last year. He mostly ignored her until she spoke with Shun. Her faith seems to have gotten stronger after the accident, and now she can see ghosts.

TAKESHI

Shun's brother. He looks like Shun, but he has a different personality. He doesn't take things as seriously as Shun. His parents own a restaurant, but they don't have much money, and he has to work there.

TAKURO

Everyone thinks he's a tough-looking, straight-A student. On the inside, he's pretty nice, but he's a bit of a loner. He's the owner of a big company. Barely managed to escape his father's shadow.

SHUN

Just moved to town and started school in the third semester. His hobby is programming. He's a bit of a loner, but he's got some friends. He's the owner of a big company. Barely managed to escape his father's shadow.

MIKA

A pretty girl in love with Takuro. She's strong-willed and kind, but she's a bit of a loner. She's the owner of a big company. Barely managed to escape his father's shadow.

Illustration by Kazuo Suzuragi



SAYA

A woman who once worked at the Jailhouse.

NAOKI

Takuro and Takeshi's former classmate who died in an accident. He's now a ghost looking for vengeance.

Illustration by Karin Suzuragi

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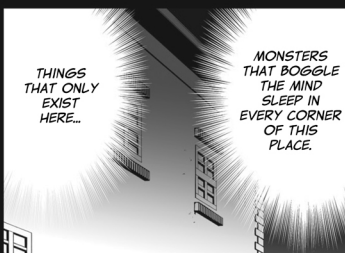
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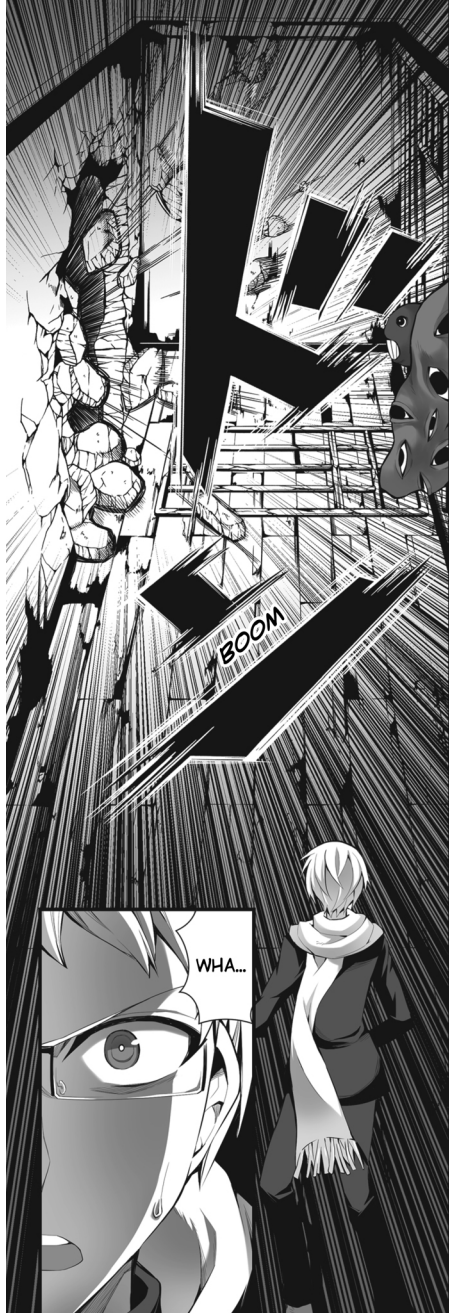
I HAD NO
IDEA THERE
WERE SO
MANY
UNIQUE
VARIETIES.





THOSE
IRON
BARS ARE
RUSTED...





崩コッ

KRRRSH



MIKA.

TAKURO.



AND IT'S
EASILY
STRONGER
THAN I AM.

NO-
WHERE
TO RUN.



I AM
TERRIBLY
SORRY...

EVERY-
ONE...



TAKESHI.

WHAT'RE
YOU
DOING,
BRAINAC?



THIS IS AS
FAR AS I
GO.

BUT IT'S
GAME
OVER.

Chapter 1

NEW VERSION

Time is unfair. It never works in my favor.

Shun sighed for the millionth time as he looked up at the dodecahedron-shaped clock on the wall. He picked up the 500-milliliter plastic bottle next to his keyboard and drank the last of the dark liquid in one gulp. It was totally flat, basically just sugar water at this point.

He rubbed his eyelids and turned back to the monitor. A dull pain undulated from the center of his head with every beat of his heart. He realized he'd been sitting in front of his computer for over 30 hours. He hadn't gotten a wink of sleep in that time, so it was no surprise that he was tired.

More than ten empty plastic bottles lay at his feet, but he still felt sleepy. He must have been too exhausted for the caffeine to even have any hope of working. If he'd just lain down in bed for an hour, he would have felt drastically better. But he didn't have the leisure of rest. He needed to finish all of his work before the next morning.

To his surprise, the clock read 5:00 P.M. He could have sworn he'd just eaten breakfast, but it was already dark outside. He only had half a day left now.

Shun pursed his lips as he typed away at the keyboard. Time always seemed to speed up and pass by in an instant when he was sweating over a job. Yet whenever he was bored, it slowed to a crawl.

If this isn't unfair, what is?

For the past two weeks, Shun had been entirely focused on finishing the latest version of the computer game he'd made. It was an escape game where the player had to find their way out of a mansion inhabited by a creepy monster. And one day in early February, this game of his had somehow become linked to the real world, leading to a string of tragedies.

The game was based on the Jailhouse, a real-life mansion in the town where Shun now lived that was reportedly haunted. And the main enemy, a blue-skinned monster, was designed based on the near-believable rumors about the creature that roamed the halls of the Jailhouse.

Most likely this monster had existed long before Shun had ever thought of making a game about it. So, why was it conforming to his creation? He still had no idea. Yet the relationship was undeniable. He'd seen it. Whatever happened in the Jailhouse played out on his game screen as if it were a live broadcast.

If a game character got eaten by the monster, he knew that it meant a real person had been attacked and killed by the Jailhouse monster after getting trapped in the mansion. It was too dangerous to ignore any longer. He had to do something.

But deleting the game wouldn't erase the monster from reality. At least, that's what Shun suspected. There was no way to know for sure, but he had a gut feeling about it.

For starters, it was impossible to completely delete the game. He'd uploaded it to the internet and, thanks to the effect of the Jailhouse rumors, it had swiftly racked up downloads. The game was also free to share, so it spread much quicker and further than he had anticipated. So even if he took down the official site, there would still be mirrors and rehosts everywhere. There was no stopping people from getting access to it.

That's why Shun had decided to take a different route. He decided to update and improve the game.

He placed a tablet PC at the game mansion's entrance. Attached was a key to unlock the front door. His thought was that if the game and reality were linked, then the same objects should now exist within the Jailhouse. This way, even if someone did get locked inside, they could quickly contact the outside world or use the key to open the door and escape. That was his thought, anyway.

But what he thought would be a simple patch turned out to be something of a nightmare. Updating a program always caused a few bugs to pop up here and there, but this update was swimming with them. Whenever he messed with one part of the game, errors would crop up in another. And fixing those would only cause more to appear somewhere else, sometimes doubling or tripling in multitude. The debug list just grew and grew.

In order to discover the root of the problem, he pored over the game's data, including the map and events he'd cut during development. It was possible that some old, leftover data was causing things to go haywire. There were seemingly endless files he'd scrapped before uploading them, and failed experiments to sift through. Shun scratched his head as he desperately tried to remain calm, investigating each and every possible offender.

Don't panic, he told himself at every interval. It might take some time, but if I stay calm and fix these bugs, surely I can finish the final version of the game. Then no one will ever fall victim to that monster again.

He'd worked tirelessly, believing that day would come. However, the situation took a dire turn yesterday. Since he'd been skipping school for so long, Anna, his class representative, had come by to check on him and deliver a flyer for a school event. Something she'd

said during her visit had sent him into a panic.

“The Jailhouse is finally going to be leveled, apparently,” Anna had suddenly said while peering curiously at Shun’s bookshelf.

“...Huh?” Shun lifted his fingers from the keyboard and looked at her. “What do you mean?”

“Takuro mentioned it today. They’re going to knock down the Jailhouse and build a new store on the site. He was complaining that his father was crazy, though, and saying that no one would come to such a creepy place.”

Takuro’s father was the president of Smile, a hardware store chain with over a hundred locations throughout the country. Shun had seen him on TV many times. Unlike Takuro, who had delicate features, his father’s face was big and manly. That alone gave him something of an intimidating presence, but combined with his sharp, hawk-like eyes and booming, threatening voice, Shun found himself completely cowed by him even through the TV.

“He’s going to be meeting with the demolition crew on-site before they tear it down. Apparently that’s two days from now, in the morning...”

Shun gulped when he heard that.

“In two days?” he asked. “Are they planning on going inside the building?”

“Probably. I mean, they have to inspect the supports in order to knock it down.”

“No! A horrible monster lives there—”

“Apparently Takuro said the same thing, but his father wouldn’t listen. He just called him silly for believing the rumors.”

Of course. That was the natural reaction. If Shun hadn’t been attacked by that giant-headed blue monster himself, he’d never have believed it really existed, either.

But multiple people had already been killed at the hands of the Jailhouse monster. The most recent victims were likely two classmates of theirs who’d been missing for the past two weeks. Shun had called their homeroom teacher and tried to inform him of this, but he never took Shun seriously. Desperate, Shun had even called the police. But as of yet, he hadn’t heard anything about them conducting an investigation into the Jailhouse. Were they all just brushing him off as a foolish child? No, the biggest factor holding them back was probably that the owner of the Jailhouse was the most powerful man in town.

And now Takuro’s father was personally going to set foot on the property. This news shook Shun. If he witnessed the monster for himself, everyone would finally believe their story. That was what they had wanted all along. But it would all be for naught if he got

trapped inside the Jailhouse and killed instead. Without weapons and preparation, he'd just end up a quick snack for the horrible beast that lived there.

What do I do?

Shun racked his brain. This man hadn't believed his own son when he'd tried to convince him. So no matter what Shun did, it would just be a waste of time. That left him with only one option. He *had* to finish the new update before Takuro's father entered the mansion in two days.

"It'll be okay. I'll figure something out," he said to Anna before turning back to his computer.

By the time his mother came home and called him to dinner that night, the sun had completely set and Anna was long gone. He must have been so engrossed in his work that he hadn't even heard her leave.

On his bed where she'd been sitting was a small paper crane. Shun got up from his desk and picked up the skillfully folded creation. It appeared to be made from a piece of notebook paper. He recognized the small words scrawled across the wings as Anna's handwriting. Careful not to destroy the crane, he slowly unfolded it to reveal a message from her. "Shun, don't push yourself too hard. Don't try to shoulder this burden yourself. Please rely on your classmates once in a while," it read.

Smoothing out the creases with his left hand, he lightly punched himself in the temple with his right.

For the sake of the people who care about me... For their sake, too, I can't allow another tragedy to occur in the Jailhouse.

He tucked Anna's note into his desk drawer, sat back down, and once again faced the bluish-white light of the monitor. He could then hear his mother's voice coming from the kitchen.

"Sorry, mom. I'm busy right now," he shouted towards the door.

With that, she stopped calling for him.

His mother had been treating him like a fragile vase ever since he'd stopped going to school. She must have been at a loss for how to interact with her son after he leaped from the school's third floor in what appeared to be a suicide attempt and, in the aftermath, refused to come out of his room. After discussing it with his father, they'd apparently decided just to wait and watch over him for the time being.

"Mom... I'm sorry," Shun apologized again, though he knew she couldn't hear him. "I swear I'll finish this in two days... so please put up with me for just a little longer."

As long as he could finish this patch, no one would ever end up trapped inside the Jailhouse again. Once there was no need to fear the

monster—once peace had returned to their lives—he'd go back to school. That was the promise Shun made to himself.

Before he knew it, the clock on the wall read 10:00 P.M. He seriously thought it might be broken, but upon checking his computer's clock to confirm, he realized it had just gotten that late.

It's okay.

Slapping his cheeks, he did his best to rally the fading fire in his belly. It was faint, but he was starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Six more hours, and he could finish. He'd be able to figure something out before morning. Just one more push.

However, unbeknownst to Shun as he waged his lonely war against the endless bugs, Takuro's father was pushing ahead of schedule and heading for the Jailhouse.

2

A lingering chill had been creeping down Kinoshita's spine ever since he'd parked the car in front of the rusted iron gate. Had he caught a cold? It would be terrible if the president came down with it, too. He recalled there being a drug store nearby. Once the president was on his way, he'd run off and buy a surgical mask.

Concerned thoughts running through his mind, Kinoshita went to open the car door. It was then that he realized his feeling was justified.

He looked up at the towering ancient mansion on the other side of the gate. The dilapidated yard exuded an otherworldly spookiness. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end, and his pulse quickened. Just looking at the mansion quickly made him feel sick. He wanted to leave immediately.

"What are you doing, Kinoshita?"

A fat man—the president of Smile—irritatedly stepped out of the car, having run out of patience waiting for a doorman that wasn't doing his job.

"How many times do I have to tell you, you halfwit? One second of my time is worth astronomically more than yours. Get that through your skull. While you're standing there spacing out, I could be making boatloads of cash!" he shouted in his usual threatening manner.

"I'm terribly sorry."

Kinoshita bowed apologetically at a perfect 45-degree angle. It had been two years since he'd started working for this man as his driver. Just hearing him shout was enough to make him reflexively assume this position.

The president continued to grumble, but Kinoshita had mastered the art of “in one ear, out the other,” and he didn’t hear a single word of it. All he had to do was respond with a properly timed, “Yes, sir!”

Two more men then got out of the car. One was a famous management consultant who had been featured on TV and in magazines multiple times. The president placed enormous trust in him, but he just seemed like a sketchy character to Kinoshita. He couldn’t stand that idiotic smile and high-pitched voice.

The other man was the chief businessman of a giant construction company that had been involved with the building of all of Smile’s previous branches. He was solidly-built and muscular, and he looked to be better suited for working in the field than behind a desk. In order to build a new store at this location, the old mansion would need to be torn down first. He was here to get an idea of what the demolition job would take.

A warm wind blew through, kicking up dust clouds. The chief demolitionist looked up at the mansion before him and rubbed his muscular arms.

It was oddly warm for the dead of winter. The weather report had once again called for temperatures that made it feel like it was early April. It certainly wasn’t cold, but the man couldn’t stop rubbing his arms. Perhaps he, like Kinoshita, also sensed something ominous about the mansion.

“This place is a little creepy,” the chief demolitionist let slip.

An angry look flashed across the president’s face.

“You only feel that way because you let stupid rumors get to you. Let’s go,” he spat curtly.

He then walked over to the iron gate, removed a very sturdy-looking padlock, and stepped onto the property.

“We’ll finish this in exactly 20 minutes. Wait here until we’re back,” he barked at Kinoshita as he walked off.

The unsavory management consultant followed hot on his heels, while the chief demolitionist trailed behind with a hesitant look on his face.

Kinoshita turned his back to the mansion and looked up at the sky. He let out a sigh of relief. It was hard to breathe with the president nearby. That was something he still hadn’t gotten used to, even after two years as his driver.

Takuro’s father had built up his huge company from nothing. There was no doubt he was talented. Kinoshita had been at a complete loss when the tool company he’d worked for more than 30 years suddenly notified him they were downsizing. He was only where he was now because, by luck, the president happened to be an

acquaintance and had decided to take him in.

Kinoshita would always be grateful for that, especially considering how bad the economy was. It wasn't easy for a beaten-down, middle-aged man in his late fifties to find work. If he'd remained unemployed, he was sure he'd probably have died on the streets by now. That's why he thought of the president as his savior.

As a businessman, he was first-class. And as men of the same generation, there was a great deal about him that Kinoshita thought was deserving of respect. But he'd never once wished to be like him. The president was a man who only thought of other humans as pawns. He ruled by fear, and that was what Kinoshita felt around him.

Kinoshita knew that, as the man who stood at the top of a vast empire of a business, the president had to be that way. But he wasn't just like that at work. It was simply his personality. As his driver, Kinoshita had the opportunity to see him outside of work many times. Yet he'd never seen him relax around anyone, much less even offer a kind smile. Not even with his family.

He seemed to treat his wife, who'd been with him through everything, as nothing more than a servant. She obediently heeded his every command like a finely crafted robot—it was sickening to recall. And it wasn't just her. The longer Kinoshita worked for the president, the more he came to realize that everyone around him was emotionless. Of course, that wasn't to say they never laughed or looked troubled. But when they did, they were awkward displays, almost as if they were executing a program that had been input beforehand.

Would he become like that one day, too? No, perhaps he had already become a robot. It made him shudder to think about.

For what it was worth, however, the president's son was incredibly attached to him. The boy's eyes shone with the deepest respect whenever he looked up at his father. Yet even so, the president only seemed to think of him as another pawn to grow his empire.

Kinoshita recalled how, one day, the boy had gotten hurt in a soccer game. Upon receiving the news, the president went pale. He immediately demanded to know if his boy had been hit in the face and if he'd be able to keep playing soccer. Kinoshita had thought it was odd, though he remembered being relieved that the president at least had something of a fatherly side to him.

But his next words had made Kinoshita doubt his own ears.

"That boy's face is going to be in our ads as part of our next marketing campaign. An injury would ruin my plans."

What would his son think if he knew how his father really felt?

Hearing something like a siren in the distance, Kinoshita looked

up. He glanced around, but nothing was different. The warm wind continued to blow, as if to spread the strange, spooky aura of the mansion even further.

Kinoshita's eyes dropped to his watch, and he cocked his head to the side. It had already been 30 minutes since the president had entered the premises. He looked back to the mansion, but there was no sign of anyone coming out.

The president had explicitly said that he'd be back in exactly 20 minutes, and he was the strictest man in the world when it came to punctuality. If he said 20 minutes, he'd be back in 20 minutes come hell or high water. And if the unthinkable had really happened and he wouldn't be on time, he'd at least call to say so.

Unease came over Kinoshita. Too nervous to think, he rushed through the untamed weeds, forging a path toward the mansion.

"Sir, is everything all right?"

He knocked on the front door, but there was no answer. He tried the knob, but it appeared to be locked from the inside and wouldn't open.

"Sir! It's well past the time you stated you would be back!"

He tried shouting loudly this time, yet nothing but the wind echoed in his ears in reply.

Maybe they went out a back entrance. If he comes back and I'm not at the car, he'll be furious.

Kinoshita turned from the mansion and began to rush back to the car when he heard the siren again—this time it was clear as a bell. His body went cold to the core. The siren continued to sound. No, it wasn't a siren... It was someone's voice.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Kinoshita turned around and looked up at the mansion. The scream was coming from the second floor. Its husky echo made it sound like the president.

"Sir!" Kinoshita called out.

But the screaming stopped, and silence fell over the yard once more.

"Sir! Are you okay?"

Kinoshita waited for a reply, but heard nothing.

"Please! Someone answer me!"

As if in response, the front door suddenly burst open. He assumed the president and his crew were about to come out, but the door simply swayed in the wind. Not a soul was to be seen.

"...Sir?"

Kinoshita cautiously approached. He peered inside, but there was no sign of movement other than the chandelier hanging from the ceiling swinging slightly from the breeze blowing through the door.

Kinoshita barged right in, not bothering to take off his shoes, and ascended the stairs covered in red carpeting. A fetid smell began to fill the air. Kinoshita had never smelled anything so foul, and the stench drove him backward a step. He tried covering his nose with his right hand, but it didn't help.

Upon reaching the second floor, he spotted the management consultant out of the corner of his eye.

"What the heck happened—"

He turned to the man, then swallowed his next words. It was, without a doubt, the same creepy guy that Kinoshita knew all too well. However, he was hardly recognizable from 30 minutes ago. His slack smile was completely gone. His eyes were open wide, pupils staring off into different directions. A long tongue hung lazily from his mouth. His head was facing Kinoshita, but underneath it appeared to be his back rather than his chest. His arms were gone, and his legs dangled in the air, swaying back and forth.

Behind him, a giant figure shifted. It wasn't human in the least. Its skin was a strange color. Its head was abnormally developed, with massive eyes that took up half its face. A blue monster. That was the perfect name for it.

The blue monster, holding the consultant's head tightly in its hand, continued to swing his body from side to side like a child playing with a doll. From the corner of its mouth protruded a human arm. It was most likely the consultant's. The sound of splintering bones echoed in Kinoshita's ears each time the monster moved its jaw up and down, and it continued to do so over and over as if relishing the texture.

"Waaaaaaaah!"

Kinoshita screamed, unable to help himself. The monster went still for a moment, and then its two giant eyes swiveled in his direction.

"Help! Help me, please!"

Kinoshita ran, nearly tumbling down the stairs. Deep down he knew that no matter how much he screamed, no one would come. In all likelihood, the president and the other man had met the same fate as the consultant. And hardly anyone ever passed by the mansion. No one would ever hear him. Yet he couldn't stop screaming.

"Someone! Please, anyone! There's a monster! There's a monster in here!"

He tried the front door, but for some reason the knob wouldn't turn. Had it locked automatically? He looked for a panel, a switch, a button, or anything else that might unlock it, but there was only an empty keyhole beneath the doorknob.

Sensing a horrifying presence behind him, he spun around. There stood the monster from earlier. Still chewing the consultant's arm like

a piece of jerky, it gazed down at him from above.

“Please... Let me go...” Kinoshita whispered hoarsely, his back pressed against the door.

The monster cocked its head quizzically and stared at him blankly as though it didn’t understand.

“I swear I won’t tell anyone about what I’ve seen. So... please... spare me...”

The monster swallowed the arm in one gulp and began slowly walking forward, extending its arms and licking its lips.

Kinoshita had never experienced anything so nightmarish. He was in full-on panic mode and had lost all ability to resist. Tears and mucus streamed down his face as he repeated the same words over and over and over again.

“Help me, help me, help me...”

The monster grabbed his chest with its left hand and slowly, deliberately inched its face closer. His nose was flooded with the stench of what smelled like buckets of blood and excrement. He nearly fainted. But if he did that, it would be the end. Kinoshita bit down on his lower lip hard, doing his best to stay conscious.

Maybe it would be less painful to die while I’m passed out, though...

Pressure began to constrict his chest, cutting off his airway. He could hear the sounds of his bones breaking, echoing throughout his body. A rib must have pierced his lung, because he began violently coughing up blood.

It hurts.

Kinoshita desperately moved his mouth, trying to suck in some oxygen, but the situation remained unchanged. All he could do was struggle for air, tongue hanging pathetically out of his mouth. His poor lungs, however, had now lost the ability to inflate and deflate.

His arms and legs began to spasm as if possessed.

Its left hand still tightly wrapped around Kinoshita’s chest, the monster pinched the top of his head with its right and gave it a quick twist to the left as if opening a plastic bottle.

...

Kinoshita heard the sound of his own spine snapping before plunging into a deep darkness.

As Kinoshita breathed his last, the steadfastly locked mansion door slowly swung open... as if to beckon the next victim into its waiting embrace.

in the east began to brighten.

Upon finishing his final checks, an intense wave of exhaustion assaulted him. He had no strength left to resist it. Stepping away from his desk, he collapsed onto his bed. Within five seconds, the sounds of light snoring echoed through the room. It was no surprise, however, considering he'd been awake for nearly 40 hours now.

With Shun's completion of the newest version of his game, things began to change within the Jailhouse, as well.

Atop the shoebox in a corner of the entrance hall suddenly appeared a book-sized tablet PC. On it was an app that allowed video calls via the internet. It would boot up automatically when the tablet was turned on, and it was programmed to immediately contact Shun. In addition, there was a blue keycard attached to the back of the device. Next to the front door, a cylinder for inserting the keycard appeared. Everything was just as Shun had intended it.

Now if anyone got trapped inside, they could just turn on the tablet and get in touch with Shun for help. He would tell them that the keycard would open the front door, and all should be well. They would be able to get out with that. And as long as the victim escaped quickly, they would be able to avoid the monster.

Shun was convinced his plan was perfect. However, even the best-laid plans of mice and men go oft awry. He'd made one mistake: assuming the Jailhouse monster had, at best, the brains of a chimpanzee.

The blue giant descended the stairs. Day was breaking, yet almost no light reached inside the mansion. Darkness shrouded everything, obscuring all from view. For a normal person, just navigating the place would be an ordeal.

However, the monster strolled without hesitation toward the shoebox, not even bothering to turn on a light. It picked up the tablet and turned it on. The white light that shone from the LCD panel made it recoil for a moment, but, squinting its eyes, it peered carefully at the screen. The communication app had started up and was trying to contact Shun.

His desktop began to play the jingle to alert him to the incoming call, but Shun was fast asleep. Perhaps if the call had awoken him, the future would have played out much differently.

The game window popped up on his monitor. It showed the entrance hall. The blue-skinned monster was standing there, tablet in hand. With a faint beep, the screen suddenly morphed. A vortex began to swirl outward from the in-game tablet. Shun's background, a picture of a shiba inu, quickly devolved into a mess.

The desktop icons, the files on the hard drive, the information flowing to and from the computer via the internet—all of it was being

sucked into the tablet at the center of the screen. The light on the broadband router connected to the computer began to flash rapidly. The hard drive began emitting a strange sound like the scratching of nails against a blackboard.

Pop!

With a sound like a fuse blowing, the monitor went black and the hard drive stopped spinning. A red light flashed on the router, indicating an abnormality. Silence returned to the room. Shun's computer sat there as if nothing had happened.

If he'd noticed this mystery and started up the game from a different computer, he would have witnessed something quite shocking. The monster was standing in the entrance hall, staring intently at the tablet. Images of the Kallima inachus and other such insects that mimicked the look of dead leaves and twigs in order to hide themselves from predators flashed across the screen one after another. It must have found them quite fascinating, for the monster's gaze remained fixated on the tablet for quite some time.

Chapter 2

ONI GA SUMU KA JA GA SUMU KA

1.) Phrase meaning to have no clue as to the horrific things or ideas inside (either the contents of a building or a person's heart)

As the images of the monster lined up vertically, horizontally, and diagonally, a sea of coins spat out at Takeshi. Loud fanfare resounded, and the word “congratulations” danced across the screen. He looked at the coins about to overflow from the tray and sighed listlessly. He’d thought that winning the jackpot would make him feel better, but it hadn’t changed a thing. In fact, the discomfort in his chest only grew. One reason for this was the Western-style art imprinted on the coins, which reminded him of the Jailhouse monster.

Trying to settle himself, he stood up and looked around. It was noon on a weekday, so the arcade was practically empty. Other than Takeshi, there was only one other patron—a man in a suit who looked like any other overworked office employee. He kept hitting the punching bag game as if blowing off stress from work.

The arcade clerk behind the counter yawned repeatedly. He hadn’t even questioned why Takeshi had been there since morning. He worked every Monday and Thursday. All the regulars knew him and his lax attitude. That was why Takeshi had come here.

It had been two weeks since Takeshi had last gone to school. At first he’d been able to fool his parents by saying he had a cold, but that excuse had run its course. He didn’t want to worry his mother needlessly. So, in order to keep the peace, he pretended to go to school. Mimicking his mother’s voice over the phone, he convinced his homeroom teacher that he was actually still at home recovering from his cold. His status as a late bloomer was often a source of irritation for him, but in this instance, he was grateful his voice hadn’t dropped yet.

At first, he hid in the hills behind school playing games on his handheld to kill time all day. Although they’d had a warm winter, the February air was still chilly. If he’d kept it up, he would have caught a cold for real sooner or later. Then he’d be forced to rest, to sleep... which would mean the nightmares again. And that was something he absolutely had to avoid.

It had been five days since he’d last slept. He was afraid to. For in his dreams, Takeshi was trapped in an endless chase with a monster. It was a disgusting giant with slick, blue skin. No matter how long and how fast he ran from it, it pursued him doggedly. Over and over, he’d trip on something and nearly fall. Takeshi would force himself to keep running. But despite his best efforts, he could never lose the monster. It would always catch him in the end, sinking its sharp fangs into his flesh... Then he’d wake up.

He tried multiple things to keep from sleeping—drinking so much coffee he wanted to barf, pressing headphones tightly against his ears with hard rock playing at loud volume—but nothing was a perfect solution. Sleep was important. Without it, humans die. Takeshi had once heard that somewhere in another country, a man had gotten addicted to an online game and had stayed up for three straight days playing it, which put him in the hospital and ultimately killed him. At this rate, Takeshi would fall prey to the same fate.

Yet he desperately wanted to stay awake. It'd be easier to simply die than have that horrible dream again.

He'd even visited the local shrines, thinking he might be possessed. Unfortunately, he didn't have the money to pay for a priest to exorcise him. He'd also bought a power stone from an online store, borrowed a suspicious "magic tome" from the library, and made a very confused attempt at a crystal healing ritual. Nothing seemed to work. He'd tied a braided bracelet around his wrist as an old-fashioned good luck charm, and wished for it to keep away evil spirits. But people said the wish you made on the bracelet wouldn't come true until it wore out and fell off on its own, and that could take years.

Suddenly Takeshi felt very heavy, as if his brain was going numb. He began to see double.

Get it together, Takeshi!

Rubbing his eyes, he looked around again. The world began to slowly spin around him. He slapped his cheek with his right hand, but his vision remained blurry.

Maybe I'll feel better if I get some soda...

That's what he thought, but he hardly took three steps before collapsing to his knees. A loud sound like the ringing of temple bells reverberated unpleasantly against his eardrums. He instinctively covered his ears, but the ringing continued, striking at the very core of his consciousness.

I feel sick. I'm gonna hurl.

Curled up on the floor, he felt someone pat him lightly on the back. Was it the arcade employee? It would be trouble if the employee somehow found out that he was skipping school.

It took all of Takeshi's strength just to mutter, "...I'm fine."

Leaning against the game machine he'd been playing not five minutes ago, he forced himself to stand up. He hadn't touched a button, yet the game started up all on its own. "Congratulations" flashed across the screen as loud fanfare once again filled the room. A sea of coins spilled out—no, it wasn't coins piling endlessly into the tray. Their long, thin bodies wriggled as their hundreds upon hundreds of legs skittered in the air.

Centipedes.

A horde of centipedes was spilling out into the coin tray. They were blue, with giant eye-like patterns covering their segmented bodies. No, those weren't patterns... The eyes shifted restlessly from side to side, intent on observing the layout of the room.

The centipedes overflowed from the tray and fell at Takeshi's feet. He reflexively stomped on them, sending sticky blue liquid spraying all over his favorite jeans.

"Hey, man!" Takeshi shouted at the arcade employee, thoroughly fed up. "What the hell is this? Some sort of prank?"

But the employee didn't answer. Takeshi felt warm breath on the nape of his neck.

"Hurry up and fix this—"

He turned around and gulped down the rest of his sentence. Behind him stood not the lazy employee, but the monster that had tormented his dreams for so long.

"Ahhhhh!"

Takeshi screamed and jumped back. Its slick skin gleamed like some kind of amphibian's. It never ceased to disgust Takeshi. And those giant eyes that took up half of its unnatural face inspired nothing but fear.

The monster let out a low growl. Its mouth was full of curved fangs, mottled red and brown like rusted pipes. It was most likely from the blood of all its past victims. Realizing he would soon become another one of those stains, an intense shiver ran through his body.

No. I don't want to die.

He desperately wanted to run, but his fear was so great that his legs refused to listen to him.

"Someone! Help me!"

Takeshi shouted at the employee behind the counter so loudly that his throat felt like it would tear apart. But the clerk only continued to hum as he played with his smartphone, as if he had no clue as to what was transpiring.

"Hey! Look at me! Please... Help meee!"

The taste of blood spread through Takeshi's mouth. Something must have split in his throat. The monster's shadow loomed over the thinly carpeted floor.

"Ah... Aahh... Aaahhhhh!"

It was right behind him. He had to flee.

Frantically swinging his arms, he crawled along the floor. He heard his down jacket rip like it had caught on a broken floor tile. He loved that jacket, but there was no time to worry about it. For if he stopped, something much worse would rip through his flesh and bone.

The inattentive employee slowly raised his head, as if finally noticing the commotion.

“Mister, help me!”

Takeshi shouted to the employee and stretched out his hand, but the guy simply shook his head silently.

“Hey, quit screwing around! Your job is more than just exchanging tokens for prizes!” Takeshi’s mouth was going a mile a minute. “You know what my mom always says? People don’t come to our restaurant just to fill their stomachs. You can’t just make tasty food and be done with it. You need to provide good service that satisfies more than just hunger. Making everyone happy is the real goal.”

“Making everyone happy?” The employee snorted and gave Takeshi a scornful look. “Have you lost your mind? Do you not remember how you terrorized me, hiding in Takuro’s shadow?”

Takeshi’s eyes went wide as he stared at him. It was no longer the arcade employee behind the counter. There, smiling coldly, was his classmate who’d been hit by a truck and died two months ago—Naoki.

2

“How...?” He swallowed. “Oh, I see... This is a dream...”

“That’s right. It’s a dream. So even if you were to get hit by a truck, you wouldn’t die like I did. What do you say? Want to try it out?” With a gleeful smile, Naoki leaped nimbly onto the counter and dangled his legs off of it.

“That wasn’t my fault. I was only obeying Takuro’s orders—” Takeshi desperately began to defend himself.

“I didn’t actually expect you to go run into traffic. It was just a joke. I didn’t know you were so tormented by my death.”

That was partly true. Takeshi *had* been part of the reason for Naoki’s death, even if only indirectly. Takeshi had always regretted that and feared the consequences.

“You don’t need to make excuses. I’m not mad or anything.”

“...So, you forgive me?”

“Yes, of course.”

It was as if the many thorns piercing his heart for the last two months suddenly dissolved. However, the relief was only momentary.

“In fact, I’m grateful to you all. If I’d survived, I never would have been able to exact my revenge.”

Takeshi was plunged back into the pits of despair.

“Should you just be standing there? If you don’t hurry up and run, you’ll be eaten.”

A creepy smile curled up the corners of Naoki’s lips. The next moment, extreme pain shot through Takeshi’s left shoulder. He looked

to see what had happened, and his eyes fell on the monster behind him. It was completely focused on chewing something long and thin. It wasn't long before Takeshi realized that something was his arm.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Blood gushed from his left shoulder. His vision darkened from the unimaginable pain.

“There's this cliché thing people do in fiction where they pinch their cheek in order to see if they're dreaming. Don't you think that's pointless? After all, you can feel pain even in a dream.” Naoki's giggles echoed in his ear. “And no matter how much it hurts, you can't die, so in some sense, it's even worse than reality.”

“Stop it! Stop it, please!”

Blood spurted from Takeshi's shoulder like a fountain with every beat of his heart. In a panic, he pressed down on it with his right hand. Unabated, the viscous fluid just seeped between his fingers.

“Please... I'm sorry... I'll do whatever you want... Just forgive me.”

“Oh, don't misunderstand. I'm not forcing you to experience this nightmare. It's a manifestation of the fear and guilt you feel deep down inside.”

“Then how can I stop it? What do I have to do to be free of this nightmare?”

“You probably have to cut it off at the source.”

“...The source?”

“You're having this nightmare because you're afraid of the monster rumored to haunt the Jailhouse, right? In that case, I guess if you went to the mansion and saw for yourself that there was no such thing, it'd all be fixed.”

Fresh pain bloomed in the back of Takeshi's head before Naoki could finish talking. The monster, having finished eating his left arm, was now chomping down again. It still wasn't full.

Takeshi could hear the sound of its fangs slicing into his own head. The horrible gnashing rang in his ears, forcing him to close his eyes. Its sharp fangs must have broken through his skull and penetrated his brain. Takeshi could distinctly feel a mixture of warm, jelly-like goo and blood flowing out of the back of his head. The fangs sunk even further into his brain. It was hot. Searing hot. It was as if all the blood in his body was boiling.

Suddenly, Takeshi was watching himself being eaten by the monster in third-person. This was a common occurrence in dreams. Yet though he was now observing his death from the outside, he still felt all the excruciating pain of it. It was too much to bear.

Blood covered him from head to toe. The monster opened its mouth wide and chomped down. The back of his skull deflated like a twisted, punctured balloon. It was hardly recognizable as him

anymore. The area around his eyelids began to tingle. He was so incredibly itchy. He lifted his right hand to his face when the monster's fang came bursting out of his eye, ripping it upward.

Chomp.

Like an overripe fruit, Takeshi's head exploded with brownish liquid. Just like that, it was all over.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

...And then, he finally woke up.

He'd apparently fallen asleep in front of the coin game. The heater in the room wasn't particularly strong, yet Takeshi's entire body was covered in sweat.

"Hey, kid. You okay?" The man in the suit who'd been having a go at the punching game earlier was peering at him with a concerned look on his face. "You don't look so hot. Want to go to a doctor?"

Takeshi shook his head. He then hurriedly got up and fled the arcade without a word. Not looking where he was going, he collided with a pedestrian on the sidewalk.

"Are you blind, you idiot?!" he reflexively shouted.

But upon realizing it was a policeman he'd bumped into, he panicked and quickly ran off.

When he finally came to a stop, he had no idea how far he'd run. Reaching out and leaning against a utility pole with his arm, he focused on calming his ragged breathing. Not only was he sleep-deprived, but now he was physically exhausted. He'd been running at full speed for who knows how long. His legs were like jelly. The innermost part of his brain tingled numbly. It almost felt as though it didn't belong to him. He wondered for a moment if the dream had been real, if his head had actually been eaten.

Once he had control of his breathing again, he raised his head. His plan had been to run around town trying to avoid being spotted, but somehow, unconsciously, he had made his way home. A sign inscribed with the words "The Happy Tummy Restaurant: Manpuku" swayed gently in the southern wind.

From the shadow of the utility pole, Takeshi peered inside the restaurant. It was just about lunchtime, so the seats were filled with customers. Takeshi's mother bustled from table to table. She'd been complaining about her back recently. Was she okay? As Takeshi watched his mother work, he felt like his chest was being squeezed by a vice.

What in the world am I doing?

He realized that he hadn't helped out at the restaurant at all for the last two weeks. His mother had been handling evening deliveries and cleaning the shop all by herself. It was clearly his fault her back was hurting.

And yet here I am, skipping school and wandering aimlessly around town. It'll just make her even more worried if she finds out I was lying. This can't go on forever. I have to do something. It's all that monster's fault. It and the nightmares it brings.

"You're having this nightmare because you're afraid of the monster rumored to haunt the Jailhouse, right?"

Takeshi recalled what Naoki had said in his dream.

"In that case, I guess if you went to the mansion and saw for yourself that there was no such thing, it'd all be fixed."

Then and there, Takeshi made up his mind. He was going to the Jailhouse. There was no such thing as monsters. Once he proved that, surely the nightmares would cease.

"I'm gonna put an end to this..."

He nodded firmly, turned his back to Manpuku, and set off.

3

Takeshi's triumphant stride grew heavier and more reluctant as he got closer to the Jailhouse. There was no way a man-eating, blue-skinned giant could really exist, yet he couldn't silence that tiny voice saying, "What if?" After all, if he truly didn't believe in the monster, he never would've had such nightmares in the first place.

On the off chance something was there, Takeshi decided he'd need a weapon. Stealing a knife from the restaurant meant risking getting caught by his parents, but he didn't have the money to go buy one, either. Prowling around the abandoned factory across from the Jailhouse, he finally found a conveniently sized iron pipe. He gripped it with his right hand and swung lightly. It was tough, but not too heavy. It would be good for self-defense.

By the time he'd found the iron pipe, darkness had begun to settle in. Thick clouds spread throughout the sky, and Takeshi could hear the rare sound of winter thunder in the distance. He remembered that the morning forecast had reported that an explosive low-pressure system was moving in. It would be smart to get into the mansion before it started pouring.

Gripping the iron pipe tightly, Takeshi stood before the Jailhouse. The padlock to the front gate was unhinged, and the gate itself was ajar. He thought someone must have gone in before him, but there were no lights on in the mansion from what he could see through the overgrown weeds.

His heart began to race.

It would be a lie to say he wasn't scared. In the past, it had terrified him just to come near the place. Whenever he went

somewhere, he'd go out of his way to avoid it, even if that meant taking the long way. It was unthinkable for him to be here after the sun set, and all alone at that.

In all honesty, the Jailhouse scared the pants off him. He wanted to run and never look back. But this time, the thought of never being free from the nightmares scared him far more than setting foot inside the Jailhouse. Just remembering the monster's horrible countenance made all his hair stand on end. The unimaginable pain of having his arms, legs, and head ripped off. The geysers of blood. His brains scattering everywhere. He never wanted to experience that again.

Takeshi glared intently at the giant mansion. Steeling himself, he took his first step onto the property. His whole body twitched as if he'd just been shocked by electricity. It was like every cell in his body was begging him to stop.

"...What are you doing here?"

Takeshi suddenly heard a familiar voice nearby. Pressing his back to the stone wall surrounding the Jailhouse, he held his breath.

"Liar. I know you're planning something awful again."

It turned out they weren't talking to him at all. The voice was coming from the street on the other side of the wall.

"Takuro's father hasn't been seen since last night. Was that your doing, as well?"

It was his class president, Anna, seemingly talking to no one in particular. What in the world was she doing? Careful not to make a sound, Takeshi inched his way along the wall. Poking his head out slightly from the iron gate, he looked down the sidewalk. The clouds that were rolling in quickly blotted out even the moon rising in the east, making it quite dark. Takeshi could see Anna standing under a streetlamp, but there was hardly any chance of her seeing him in the shadow of the wall.

"Cease your foolishness. This won't ease your hate. You'll just become hollow."

Anna was holding her schoolbag with a shiba inu key chain dangling from it. She must have been on her way to cram school. But who was she talking to? Takeshi looked around where she was standing, but there was no one else there. He squinted, but there was still no sign of a second person. The road was narrow enough that only one car could barely pass through, but there was nothing obstructing his view from where he stood, and there were no blind spots he was aware of.

"Of course. I haven't forgotten about that, either. How could I?"

But it wasn't just that Takeshi couldn't see who Anna was talking to. He couldn't hear anyone else, either. And yet Anna continued to talk to this unseen phantom.

What's with her...?

Goosebumps covered his whole body. This was beyond creepy. His knees began to buckle.

"It's your fault Takeshi's been staying home from school, isn't it?"

He nearly let out a pathetic yelp of a scream upon hearing his name suddenly come up. He quickly covered his mouth.

"I heard Takuro and Hiroshi talking about how they went to visit him last week. They said he looked like a ghost, he was so thin. He wasn't sleeping and had huge bags under his eyes."

Takeshi touched his face. He hadn't realized. Was it really that bad? It was true that Takuro and Hiroshi had come to check on him. It was so out of character for Takuro that Takeshi had been suspicious of what he might be up to. But what was even more shocking was that he and Hiroshi were chatting amicably when they'd had zero prior contact.

Had he missed something? Had something happened between them? Takeshi couldn't help asking about it. But Takuro had just smiled in his usual nihilistic way and said, "So, you don't remember, either, huh?"

"When they asked why he wasn't coming to school, he just said, 'A blue monster is chasing me.' We reset the game, so Takeshi shouldn't remember anything about that day. So why is it that he's so afraid of a phantom monster? I can only conclude that you're involved somehow."

That day? What day?

"Please, just stop it. If you keep this up, you'll never be saved—"

"Hey, Anna." Takeshi was moving before he realized it. He jumped out onto the sidewalk and approached Anna. "What do you know?"

Her face went pale.

"Takeshi... What are you doing here?"

She was usually so calm, but her big eyes opened wide in blatant surprise. His appearance had clearly shaken her.

"Who were you talking to just now?"

"What are you talking about? It's just me here. There's no one else around, is there?"

"Don't try to fool me!" He struck the iron pipe in his right hand against the ground, attempting to scare her. "Were you talking to the monster?"

"Monster? I have no idea what you're—"

"I said, don't try to fool me!" he shouted, cutting her off.

It gave her quite a start.

"The monster's here, isn't it?" he asked, looking up at the creepy mansion looming in the darkness.

Anna simply looked at the ground, not responding. He grabbed her arm and began dragging her toward the building.

“Hey! What are you doing?”

Anna tried to resist, but there was no way in hell Takeshi was going to let go. He just continued to drag her along.

“You know about the monster, don’t you? Then take me to it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Come on, let’s just calm down and talk this out. We could go to a family restaurant—”

Ignoring her pleading, Takeshi dragged her all the way to the mansion entrance. He twisted the knob, and the door swung open easily.

A fancy entrance hall, the likes of which he’d only seen in foreign films, spread out before them. The chandelier hanging from the ceiling looked like a golden firework in full bloom against the summer night sky. He hadn’t seen any lights from outside, but he could see now that the whole place was illuminated. He’d imagined that the abandoned building would be a dusty, dirty mess, but it was spotless.

“Does someone live here?” he asked, but Anna wouldn’t answer.

Takeshi adjusted his grip on the iron pipe. The palms of his hands were starting to get sweaty.

I’m scared.

He was doing his best to act strong, but there was no stopping his body from shivering. He wanted to run away and never look back, but that wouldn’t change anything. The nightmares would never stop plaguing him.

“Come out and face me!” he shouted into the depths of the mansion, his voice squeaking with fear.

He listened closely, but heard no response. Takeshi sighed heavily, then proceeded into the building without removing his shoes. He passed by the staircase and went straight to the back of the house.

At the far end of the entrance hall sat a stuffed bear. Its paws were raised above its head in a threatening pose. At the bear’s feet lay a striped necktie and a clearly high-end tie pin embedded with a gemstone. What were they doing here? He bent down and picked them up. Red stains dotted the necktie. It looked like blood. He lifted his head and looked at the bear, which was baring its fangs with a fearsome expression on its face. It almost seemed as though the bear had eaten the necktie’s owner.

“...That can’t be.”

Takeshi shook his head to purge such unsettling thoughts.

Whunk.

He heard something smack against a wall.

“Wh-What was that sound?” he asked, turning to Anna.

But Anna simply knit her brow in worry, remaining silent. Instead,

a bestial call echoed through the mansion as if to answer him. The door at the end of the long hall burst open, putting a punctuated end to all of Takeshi's bravado.

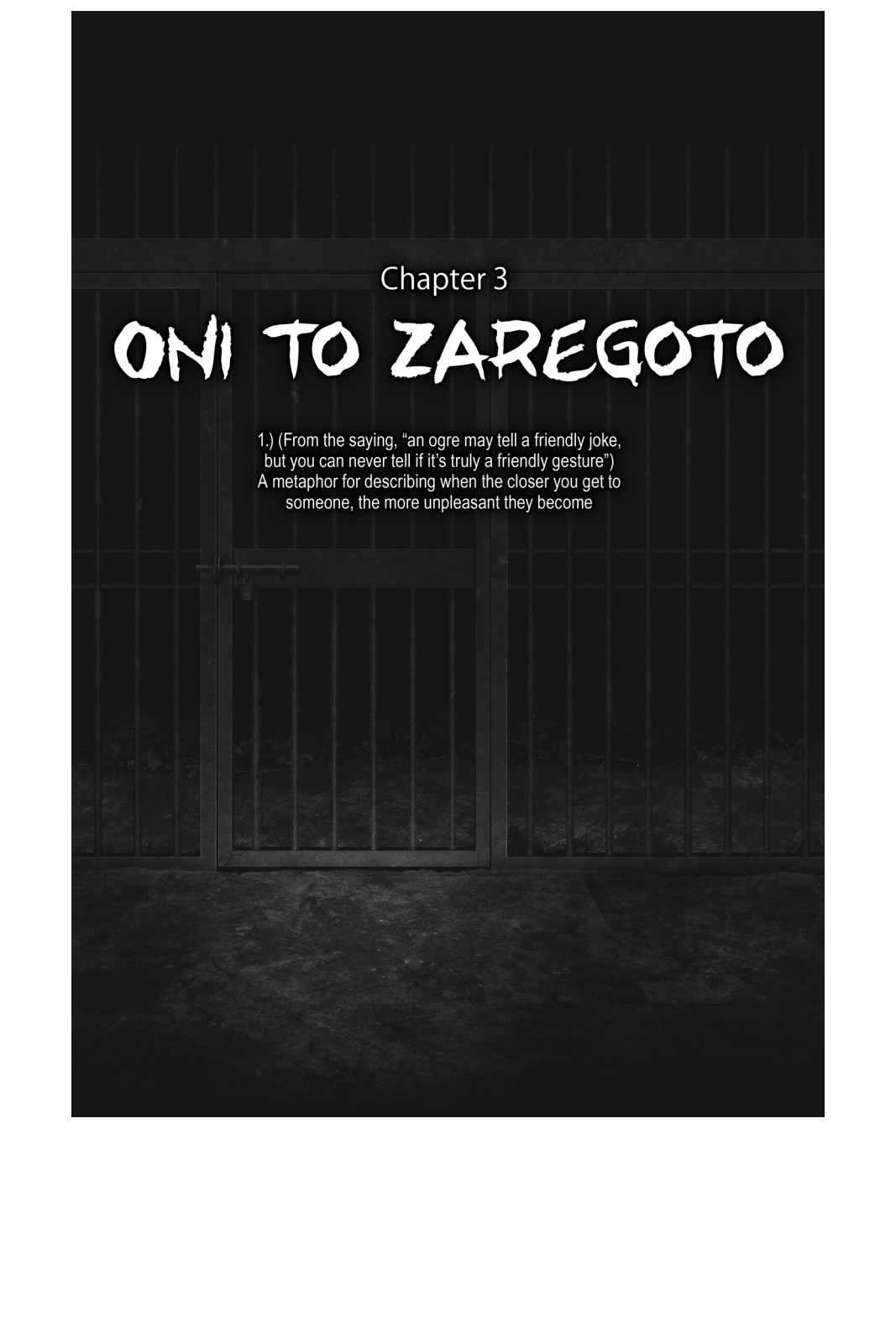
"Uwaaaaah!"

He shoved Anna aside and dashed back through the entrance hall, out the open door, and into the ravaged yard. Behind him, the sound of the front door slamming shut rang out.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

No! I'm scared! It's going to kill me! I don't want to die yet!

Takeshi fled the property without ever looking back.



Chapter 3

ONI TO ZAREGOTO

1.) (From the saying, "an ogre may tell a friendly joke, but you can never tell if it's truly a friendly gesture")
A metaphor for describing when the closer you get to someone, the more unpleasant they become

Upon hearing the anxiety-inducing third movement of *Sinfonia Tapkaara*, Shun sprang out of bed. He reflexively checked the clock on the wall. It read 7:20. Seeing it was completely dark outside his window, he could tell that evening had long since settled in. Apparently he'd been sawing logs for over 12 hours.

Shun grabbed his laptop from where it sat leaning against a corner of the bookcase. It was the source of the intense piccolo performance. The third movement of *Sinfonia Tapkaara* was what Shun had set for the ring tone of the communication app installed on his laptop. Until last year, he'd often enjoyed staying up late video chatting with his close friends from school, but that all came to an end after he moved. All it took was a little bit of distance to extinguish a friendship, he'd learned. So, who on earth would be calling him now?

He cocked his head quizzically and opened the laptop. The screen displayed the notification: "Jailhouse PC calling." That sobered him instantly.

With his latest update to the game, he'd added a tablet PC inside the mansion in order to allow contact with the outside world. He wasn't sure if his experiment would work, but this told him everything he needed to know. It seemed his work was a resounding success. He couldn't afford to celebrate, however. That piercing, echoing orchestra melody was proof that someone was inside the Jailhouse.

He moved the cursor to the answer button and quickly clicked it. The Jailhouse interior appeared on the monitor.

"...Shun?"

Anna looked at him nervously through the screen. Shun recognized the calming palette of terracotta tile behind her. It was the design of the Jailhouse bathrooms. She must have been hiding in one of them.

"Anna, can you hear me?" he asked impatiently and grabbed the computer with both hands.

"Yeah, I can, but... I don't understand. What's going on here? How did I end up connected with you?"

There was no time to explain. Shun ignored her questions and pressed on with his own.

"What are you doing in there? You know how dangerous it is!"

"I'm sorry. I was on my way to cram school when I ran into Takeshi, and he dragged me in here."

"Is Takeshi with you?"

"No. A cat jumped out of a room and scared him off. I tried to go

after him, but the front door slammed in my face.”

A low, heavy sound suddenly echoed through the speakers over Anna’s voice.

“...What was that?” she asked, her eyes darting around fearfully.

Somewhere in the Jailhouse, the monster was causing a ruckus. This was no time for idle chatter.

“Anna, get out of there! Now!” Shun shouted, wiping away the sweat forming on his brow. “Check the back of the tablet. There’s a blue keycard, right? You can use that to open the front door. Hurry!”

The video feed shook, and Anna disappeared from the screen. She’d flipped over the tablet in order to look for the key.

“Huh? I don’t see anything...”

The picture shook again, and Anna’s perturbed face reappeared.

The card wasn’t there? Shun went as white as a sheet. Did reality not reflect the in-game changes he’d made after all? No, that couldn’t be it. Anna was holding the tablet he’d put in.

“That’s odd... Maybe it came loose and fell somewhere. Yeah, that must be it.”

Shun was doing his utmost to stay calm. If he fell into panic, that wouldn’t help Anna any. It would only worry her more.

“Peek into the hall to see if the monster is there. If it’s not, run as fast as you can to the front door. Got it?” he instructed.

“Yeah.” Anna nodded fiercely. “I was shaking uncontrollably earlier, unable to think. But seeing your face has given me courage. Thanks... Okay, I think the hallway’s clear. I’m going for it.”

“Be careful.”

Before Shun could even finish saying that, the image on the monitor began shaking violently, making it impossible to tell what was going on. She must have tucked the tablet under her arm before running. He could hear her footsteps and labored breath.

It’ll be okay. Anna will surely make it out alive.

Shun desperately tried to tell himself that, but his anxiety continued to balloon. He felt like his entire body was about to explode.

What if she couldn’t find the keycard? And even if she did find it, there was no guarantee that it would unlock the front door. What if the monster appeared at the worst possible moment right in front of the door? Shun could see it now... The blue monster mercilessly attacking the defenseless Anna. Red fluids splattering everywhere. Silence settling over the mansion. And then, finally, the disgusting sound of gnashing echoing through the halls.

Three weeks ago, Shun had witnessed Anna’s grisly demise. They’d been fortunate, and time had reversed itself. The incident had effectively never happened, but Shun still remembered it. And he

never wanted to witness something so hellish again.

“Oh!” he heard Anna exclaim.

The Jailhouse live feed ceased shaking up and down, and a picture came back into focus. Shun could now see the mansion wall displayed on his laptop screen. Anna must have stopped right before arriving in the entrance hall.

Bottomless, screaming anxiety bubbled up in Shun instantly.

A mysterious sound assaulted his ears, making him want to cover them. Now he could only see the mansion ceiling displayed on the monitor. The tablet must have fallen to the floor.

“Oh... Oh, God! Oh, God!” Anna whispered hoarsely.

A blue shadow cut across the corner of the screen.

“Anna, run!” Shun shouted, but there was no way to know if she heard him.

That was the last change he saw on the monitor. All it showed him now was a static image of the white ceiling. Shun turned his computer’s volume to max, but he could only hear the infrequent sounds of rattling windowpanes. He had no idea what was happening to Anna.

“Anna!”

He tried calling out to her, but there was no response.

“That’s right! The game!”

Shun tossed the laptop onto his bed and ran over to his desk. Maybe he could learn something if he started up the game.

He rapped hard on the keyboard, but the monitor stayed black. And no matter what button he pressed, it remained that way. Not even moving his mouse produced a response.

Shun then checked all the cords, thinking perhaps something had accidentally gotten unplugged, but nothing was amiss. He unplugged them all and plugged them back in to be sure, but the OS wouldn’t boot.

“What’s going on here?”

It had worked just fine that morning. He tried a number of troubleshooting measures, but the monitor only displayed a mysterious code. It wasn’t even a proper error message to tell him what was wrong. He’d never experienced anything like it.

I can’t sit around playing with this.

Shun picked up his laptop and darted out of the room.

The apartment was dark. His parents apparently weren’t back from work yet. Feeling his way through the hall, he switched on the front light. His mother’s smartphone was sitting on top of the shoe cubbies by the front door. She must have forgotten it. That was lucky. Now he could connect to the internet even outside. He grabbed it and slipped it into his jeans pocket. Normally his mother’s forgetfulness

was a source of vexation, but it proved oddly useful at times like these.

“Anna, I’m coming to save you!”

Putting on his parka, he dashed out of the house. Creepy, dark clouds spattered the night sky like an ominous portent of calamity to come.

Upon reaching the street, Shun flagged down a taxi and asked the driver to take him to the Jailhouse. He seemed to understand what exactly that meant.

“Why are you going there, kid? Did you talk to your parents about this?” the driver asked, looking back at Shun through the rear-view mirror.

“Please. My friend is in danger.”

Not answering the man’s question, Shun simply bowed his head. He must have looked quite desperate. The driver didn’t ask anything more and set off.

2

There’s a blue, man-eating monster haunting the Jailhouse.

Shun had heard that odd rumor practically every day since moving to this town. It had been the inspiration for the escape game he’d made. But why were his game and the real-life Jailhouse linked? He still had no clue. He’d turned it over and over again in his head, yet couldn’t make sense out of it.

But the reason aside, their connection was certain. He had updated the game in the latest version to include a tablet PC by the front door in the entrance hall. And the exact same item he’d added had also appeared in the real Jailhouse. Anna calling him on it was proof of that.

Which means it’s possible...

A dark thought crossed Shun’s mind and made him frown as he looked at his reflection in the window.

Have I had the completely wrong idea this whole time?

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Shun was under the impression that the monster haunting the Jailhouse for some 20 odd years now had become a local legend. He’d used information he’d learned from the townspeople to create his game, which was why the game and reality seemed to mirror each other.

But that didn’t explain everything. For example, there was the construction of the mansion. Shun had created an in-game map for the place using his imagination, with only the mansion’s exterior to go off of. Yet the layout of the real mansion turned out to be exactly the

same as what he'd mapped out. Short of Shun having the power of clairvoyance, that should have been impossible.

And on top of that, the mansion's inner state changed according to Shun's programming. Taking everything into consideration, there seemed to be one answer that would explain it all.

If that's true...

Shun bit his lower lip.

What if it was none other than me who created the Jailhouse monster?

It didn't exist in uninhabited mountains or at the bottom of the ocean. It made its home in the corner of a fairly populated town. Wasn't it strange that the monster hadn't once been spotted in 20 years? If it had only sprung into existence weeks ago when Shun made his game, that would explain it.

Why did I bother with the tablet and keycard at the entrance? Couldn't I have just deleted the monster from the game, deleting the real monster in the process? I'm an idiot. Why didn't I realize this earlier?

Shun ground his teeth, frustrated at his own foolishness.

If the monster kills Anna...

A chill ran down his spine as he imagined the worst possible outcome.

"How could you?"

Anna's words—spoken in a different time line that only Shun remembered—surfaced in his mind.

"Will you just stop all this? Let us out of here now!"

Back then, she'd thought Shun was the mastermind behind it all. Naturally, he'd denied it. But maybe she was right all along.

If the monster killed Anna, and if Shun was the monster's creator, then it would be like Shun himself had killed her.

The taxi stopped in front of the property gate.

"I'll be right back. Please wait here," Shun said to the driver as he quickly jumped out of the car.

Shun slipped through the half-open gate and sprinted through the yard. The front door to the mansion was wide open, and he could see a figure curled up just inside.

"Anna!"

The figure nearly jumped at the sound of his voice, and Shun could see straight, black hair waving in the wind. There was no doubt in his mind it was Anna.

"Shun...?" he heard her whisper. Her perfect lips were nearly purple.

"Are you okay?"

Shun ran immediately over to her and consolingly rubbed her back. He gave her a quick look over, and his cursory examination indicated she wasn't seriously hurt anywhere.

“Thank goodness...”

The second he felt relief to see her safe, a bestial howl echoed from the bowels of the building. There was no telling when the monster might attack again. They needed to leave immediately.

“Anna, can you walk?”

Anna nodded silently. Her eyes as she looked up at him were hollow. She must have had quite a scare. Lending her a shoulder, he carefully helped her stand up. He tried to lead her to the door, but she resisted for some reason.

“...Anna?”

“No... I’m scared...”

She was talking, but her lips were barely moving. She was so very pale. Whatever she’d been through, it was worse than Shun had imagined.

He tightly held on to her faintly shivering left hand and half dragged her out of the mansion. Practically running back across the yard, they jumped into the waiting taxi. Anna collapsed against the seat and stared into empty space, breathing heavily. Her pulse was rapid.

“Whoa, what’s this? She okay?” The driver turned to them, looking worried.

“Please take us to the nearest hospital,” Shun asked the driver.

Shun took Anna’s hand to comfort her as she suffered. Her palm was horribly cold.

3

He’d come so far. It had to be safe now.

Flopping onto the park bench, Takeshi took a moment to steady his ragged breathing. His head was pounding thanks to his reckless flight.

After a few deep breaths, his pulse calmed down, but his headache only got worse. He was thankful for it. There was no way he would fall asleep now.

He was so drenched in sweat that he was starting to get cold. The warm southern wind felt chilly on his skin.

Let’s just go home.

Telling himself that, he started to get up from the bench.

“Hey, Takeshi.”

That was when someone tapped him on the shoulder from behind. Takeshi let out a pitiful yelp, but upon turning around, he saw it was only Takuro and Mika.

“What’re you screaming at me for? I know you’re a scaredy-cat,

but at least have *some* backbone. Why are you so scared?" Takuro smirked.

"What're you doing out at this hour?" Takeshi asked.

"That's my line. You haven't been to school in over two weeks. What the hell are you doing here?"

"I was... uh..." Takeshi tripped over his words.

Takuro's father owned the Jailhouse property. He was sure he'd yell at him if he told Takuro he'd snuck in. As he was searching for an answer, another voice came from the park entrance.

"It's just as I thought," said the familiar voice. "I believe Takuro's father came here, as well."

Takeshi looked up to see the smartest kid in their class, Hiroshi. He was in his usual school uniform and slowly approaching the group.

That reminds me...

"Takuro's father hasn't been seen since last night. Was that your doing, as well?"

Anna's words surfaced in the back of Takeshi's mind.

"Is your father still missing?"

"Yeah," Takuro replied curtly. "It's nothing new for him to be busy with work and not contact us for days, but something seems odd this time."

"What do you mean?"

"My father's car was found in the station parking lot this morning. The GPS and stereo were all ripped out." Takuro's shapely brow wrinkled before he continued. "And it's not just my father. The old man who drives him around and the consultant he always relies on are missing, too. The only obvious conclusion is they got involved in some sort of crime. But the lazy-ass police aren't doing a thing to help. They're just 'monitoring the situation.' So I thought, hey, there's someone more reliable than them in my class—that's when I called Hiroshi."

Takeshi stared in silence. What was going on? Takuro, who felt an obsessive need to be the best at everything, usually hated Hiroshi, the smartest kid in their grade.

"Hey, Hiroshi, why do you think my father was here, anyway?"

"Back when you showed me his car in the parking lot, I noticed purple foxtail seeds stuck to the tires," Hiroshi replied as he pushed up his glasses.

"Purple foxtail?"

"Also known as bristlegrass, it's a type of grass from the genus *Setaria*. The tips of its seeds are purple, which is where the name comes from. There's a great deal of it growing near the park entrance. That's quite uncommon in the winter, so it stuck out to me as odd, but I never thought knowing where it was would become a clue in such a

fashion. It's been a warm winter, and there's plenty of sunshine here during the day, which must be why it's growing in such a place," said Hiroshi, droning on at length. "I checked the area and found distinct patches where the purple foxtail grass had been crushed. The width of the crushed patches matches the width of the tires on your father's car exactly. They must have taken a turn here."

"If they were around here, then my father was most likely headed for..."

All eyes turned in the same direction. Above the high stone walls, they could see the jagged roof of the Jailhouse in the distance.

"I snuck a look at your father's schedule in the car while the police weren't looking, and it seems he had a meeting this morning with someone from a construction company about the demolition of the Jailhouse. It's not impossible that meeting was moved up," Hiroshi said, his hand on his chin.

"So, the construction guy might know something, you think? I'll ask my father's secretary right now," Takuro said as he took out his smartphone and made the call.

While this was going on, Takeshi's headache continued to worsen. It was as if someone was hitting the inside of his skull with a hammer. Perhaps noticing his distress, Hiroshi drew closer with his usual stoic expression on his face.

"Takeshi, I have a question."

"Wh-What do you want?" Takeshi asked, pressing himself all the way back against the bench.

"Where did you go today?"

"What's it to you? It's a free country, isn't it?"

"Who told you that Takuro's father is missing?"

"..."

"You asked him if his father was still missing before he could explain the situation. In other words, you already knew that he'd disappeared."

"I-I saw it on the news."

"I don't believe any news outlets have reported on the matter yet, seeing as it's unclear whether or not a crime has been committed."

Even Takuro was glaring at him out of one eye as he was talking on the phone. Sweat began to pour from Takeshi's temples. His headache worsened further still.

"I heard it from Anna."

Hiroshi would see through all of his half-baked lies, so Takeshi decided to tell the truth.

"Anna...? You saw Anna?"

"Yeah."

"That's odd. She shouldn't know anything, either."

“I’m not lying. I overheard her talking to someone about Takuro’s dad.”

“Where did you see her?”

“Well...”

Takeshi swallowed his next words. The moment he told them he’d thrown her into the Jailhouse and then run, they’d surely berate him for being a coward. But his constant glances behind him must have given him away.

“Don’t tell me... the Jailhouse?” Hiroshi guessed correctly on the first try.

“Uh... no.”

It would be suspicious to outright deny it, but he didn’t have the guts to boldly lie to their faces.

“Looks like your guess wasn’t wrong, Hiroshi,” Takuro cut in as he hung up. “According to the secretary, they haven’t been able to make contact with the construction guy since last night, either.”

“So, what does that mean?” Mika, who had been silent until then, finally piped up.

“That they were probably attacked by the Jailhouse monster.”

A chill went down Takeshi’s spine to hear Takuro speak so frankly about his own father like that. He was sweating profusely now. He checked his pockets for something to wipe his face with and grabbed the first thing he felt.

“Hey, that’s—”

“Huh?”

What he’d pulled out was the bloody necktie he’d picked up in the Jailhouse.

“Ah... Uwaaaaah!”

Recalling the horrifying sight of that stuffed bear, he threw the necktie to the ground. Takuro bent down and picked it up. His face flared into a fearsome grimace as he marched up to Takeshi.

“This is my father’s necktie and pin. I gave them to him for Father’s Day last year, so there’s no mistaking it.”

“...Huh?”

“Yeah, so where did you get these?”

Takuro grabbed Takeshi by the collar.

“I-I can’t breathe... Takuro...”

“Spit it out. If you don’t hurry up, I’ll kill you.”

He knew all too well from hiding in Takuro’s shadow for so long that that was no idle threat.

“I found them... in the Jailhouse...”

“I knew it.”

Takuro loosened his grip. Takeshi rubbed his throat, coughing loudly.

“Where is Anna?” Hiroshi asked.

Takeshi just silently shook his head.

“Is she still inside the Jailhouse.”

“...”

“Am I right?”

“...Yes.”

Takeshi nodded meekly, whereupon Takuro jumped on him again.

“So, what? You abandoned her there and ran away by yourself?

You’re the worst, you know that?”

Coming from Takuro, who only considered other people to be his pawns, that was shocking. Was he just pretending to be a goody two-shoes in front of Hiroshi? No, Takeshi didn’t think that was it. Takuro was glaring at him with genuine anger—something he went out of his way to hide in front of other people. Something must have changed in him while Takeshi was away.

“Let’s go.”

Dragging Takeshi by the arm, Takuro started to walk off.

“Where are you going?”

“Where else? The Jailhouse. I have to save my father and Anna.”

“That’s not like you. Why are you panicking? Your dad owns the place, right? So what’s there to worry about?” Mika said, playing with her nails listlessly.

“You don’t actually believe the monster exists, do you?” Takuro shook his head. “You guys don’t understand anything. If we don’t do something, they’re both going to be killed. We have to hurry!”

With that, Takuro gave Takeshi a swift kick in the pants.

“Quit stalling. Take me to Anna.”

“All right, all right... But just wait a sec.”

It was suicide to go empty-handed. Takeshi once again picked up the iron pipe he’d tossed into the corner of the park.

Takuro then dragged Takeshi back to the Jailhouse. Hiroshi and Mika followed close behind. Clear hesitation filled Mika’s face. Hiroshi was restlessly scanning their surroundings and muttering to himself. Whatever he was thinking was a mystery, as usual.

Lightning forked through the dense clouds above, lighting up the mansion in a creepy manner.

“Welcome to the Jailhouse.”

Takeshi could have sworn he heard someone whisper in his ear. Innocent giggling followed. It sounded just like Naoki did in his nightmares.



Chapter 4

ONI WO ISSHA NI NOSU

1.) (From the phrase, "to ride in a carriage with a terrifying ogre") A metaphor for something exceptionally dangerous

The mansion door was wide open. Through it, they could see the entrance hall chandelier lighting up the interior. A strange sense of déjà vu washed over Hiroshi as he stared at the quiet hall. This was his second time being here.

His mind went back to two weeks ago, when he'd followed Takuro and his gang here as they forced their way in. He'd never gone further than the entrance hall. That's what he remembered, but after hearing Takuro talk about the blue monster, he was starting to doubt himself. According to Takuro, apparently they'd all been trapped inside the Jailhouse and relentlessly chased by a mysterious monster that day.

"I can't really explain it, but what happened inside the Jailhouse and the events of Shun's game were synchronized. When I jumped out of the attic, the game restarted. That's probably why all your memories of what happened vanished. Not even Shun has a clue why I'm the only one who still remembers."

That was how Takuro had explained it to him. Since it was coming from someone he'd never spoken with before, Hiroshi was quite stunned at first, but he quickly accepted Takuro and his crazy story. Hiroshi was a man of science and staunchly denounced anything that didn't have a basis in reason... but for some reason, he just couldn't laugh off the idea of the Jailhouse monster. Perhaps Takuro was telling the truth.

That suspicion only grew more distinct as he stood before the mansion.

Takeshi, shivering as he hid in the wardrobe. Mika, crying and broken as she hid in the shadow of a bed.

"Let's continue to assist each other."

"Yeah, all right."

Even shaking hands with Takuro. Fragments of memories he should have lost were rising up from the deepest recesses of his brain.

"This is where I saw Anna last."

The frightened voice in his ear brought Hiroshi back to reality.

"And I picked up the necktie somewhere over there."

A quivering Takeshi was pointing towards the back of the entrance hall. The iron pipe he'd brought as a weapon looked more like a walking stick that he desperately needed to remain upright.

"Hey, Anna!" Takuro shouted.

No one responded.

"Don't do that, Takuro! If you make too much noise, the monster will hear—"

Before Takeshi could finish, the door behind them slammed shut.

“Yeeek!” His pathetic scream echoed through the halls.

Hiroshi twisted the knob, but it seemed to have locked automatically and showed no signs of opening.

“What do we do? What do we do?! We’ve been trapped in here again!” Takeshi began frantically flailing about, like a butterfly caught in a spider’s web.

“...Again?”

“No, that’s not right. This is our first time here, right? But it kinda doesn’t feel that way. Did I dream this?” Takeshi’s face paled. “That’s right—this looks just like my nightmares. We were all killed by the monster. Oh, God! We have to get out of here quickly!”

Hiroshi heard a chattering sound behind him almost like the playing of castanets. He turned around to see Mika shivering in fright. Normally she was fairly composed, but she was shaking so badly now that her teeth barely lined up right as they clacked against each other.

That’s right... It wasn’t just Hiroshi. Takeshi and Mika had also been here before, too. And now that they were back, that forgotten fear was blooming within them. Takuro pulled out an ancient brass key from the pocket of his chino pants.

“Takuro, what is that?”

“The spare key to this place.”

As he spoke, Takuro casually walked over to the front door and slotted it into the keyhole. It made a lot of noise as it rattled, but the knob didn’t turn.

“Damn it. So, it’s really not openable from the inside, huh?”

Looking annoyed, he walked away, leaving the key in the hole. “My phone says no service, too. Can’t get anyone to pick up.”

“Huh? What’s going on?” Takeshi asked pitifully.

“Don’t worry,” Takuro said, flashing his usual smile and looking at each of them in turn. “I know how to escape.”

“Then let’s hurry—”

“But on the off chance we get caught, I need you all to remember this: if something happens to me, jump out of the white door in the attic. It’s pretty high, but you’ll be fine. That should fix everything.”

“Wh-What are you talking about, man? Explain it in layman’s terms,” Takeshi interjected.

“God, you’re such a pain. Just go hide in a closet and shake in your boots for all I care. Leave everything to me,” Takuro said.

Without even a moment’s hesitation, he then turned and took his first step into the depths of the mansion.

“Takuro, don’t you think we shouldn’t move around too much?”

“It’s fine. You all stay there. I’ll have that door open in no time.”

And with that, he dashed up the stairs, leaving the other three in

the entrance hall.

“He’s always so selfish,” Mika muttered. “What now? Should we go after him?”

“No, let’s wait here and have faith in him,” Hiroshi answered.

He then took a moment to look around, but he didn’t see anything particularly odd. If Takuro’s father had been attacked here, wouldn’t there be signs of a struggle? And that wasn’t all. It was said that this place had been abandoned for over 20 years. If it had really gone that long without anyone around and without any upkeep, the walls and floor should have been in horrible condition. There should have been cobwebs everywhere and dust caking the floor. Yet the entrance hall was spick and span like someone had just finished cleaning it.

Something else caught Hiroshi’s eye. On top of the shoe rack by the front door was a brand-new, unceremoniously dumped tablet. Nothing like that was in Shun’s game, so why was it here? Hiroshi picked up the tablet and pressed the power button on the side to turn it on. He was well aware that this mansion was filled with danger. There was no telling what traps might lie in wait. He could be killed if he let his guard down for even a moment, but his curiosity was far too strong to let that stop him.

The LCD screen flashed white, and the device woke from sleep mode in less than a second, automatically launching multiple programs. A communication app that Hiroshi often used was one of them, and as soon as it booted up, it began calling someone. Hearing the ringing tone coming from the tablet, Takeshi let out another pitiful squeal of a scream.

“Wh-What is that? Is it going to explode?”

He jumped away from Hiroshi and pressed his back against the door. His over-exaggerated fear had the reverse effect of making those around him more calm. It was highly likely that wasn’t his intention, but it made him a strange source of comfort.

“...Huh? Hiroshi?”

Suddenly hearing his name, Hiroshi returned his gaze to the tablet. Shun’s face was framed in the video call window.

“What’s going on here? Takuro’s phone can’t get a signal, yet this connects to you?”

“I pushed out a new version of the game... but I guess that wouldn’t make any sense to you. I’ll explain the details later. Can you answer my questions first?” Shun spoke hurriedly. “That’s the Jailhouse, right? What are you doing there?”

Colorful neon lights slipped by behind Shun’s head. It appeared he was in a vehicle. There was even the name of a local taxi company in large letters across what Hiroshi assumed was the rear windshield.

“We came here to look for Takuro’s father, who’s been missing

since last night—”

“I told you not to go in there! Get out! Now!” Shun scolded harshly, cutting him off.

“Hey, new kid. Don’t order us around when you don’t know anything,” Takeshi shouted as loud as he could, still practically on the verge of tears. He then frantically jiggled the knob on the door. “It’s not like I want to be here. But the door won’t open, so what are we supposed to do?”

“Is that Takeshi? Are he and Mika there, too?”

“Yes. Very perceptive,” said Hiroshi, slightly surprised.

It was an impressive leap in logic to go from hearing Takeshi’s voice to realizing Mika must be there, as well. Hiroshi was suddenly reminded that the four of them, Takuro included, had been the namesakes of the four characters in Shun’s game. Was it just a coincidence? He felt like he was forgetting something incredibly important. The nape of his neck felt itchy.

“Where’s Takuro?” asked Shun.

“He’s not here right now. He went up to the second floor by himself to find his father.”

“That’s not good. Call him back immediately.” Shun’s tension was palpable even through the tablet screen.

“Hey, I told you to stop ordering us around, new kid!” Takeshi shouted, forcing his head past Hiroshi and sticking it in front of the tablet screen.

“And how do we get out of here once we have Takuro? Do you know?” Hiroshi asked calmly.

“Is there a blue keycard on the ground somewhere in the entrance hall?” Shun immediately replied. “If you use that, you should be able to open the front door right away.”

“A keycard?”

Hiroshi scanned the floor around his feet. He looked down the hall stretching east from the entrance, too, but didn’t see anything of the sort.

“Negative.”

“How about on the back of the tablet? Is there anything attached to it?”

Hiroshi flipped the tablet over and checked as instructed, but there were only some torn pieces of tape. There was still no keycard to be found.

“That’s weird... Where did it go?” Shun cocked his head quizzically on the screen.

“Stop spouting random crap, man. I bet there was never any key
—”

“Anna! Do you think you might still have the key on you?”

Takeshi's expression went stiff when he heard those surprising words.

"...Huh? Key?" A terribly weak voice echoed from the tablet's speakers. It was definitely Anna. "No, I don't... The only thing I have on me is my handkerchief."

"Do you remember what you did with the key after you opened the door?" Shun asked, his head turned to the right. She must have been sitting next to him.

"Shun, is Anna all right?"

Shun nodded.

"I got her out of the Jailhouse a minute ago, and I'm taking her to the hospital by taxi now."

"Is she hurt?"

"No. I don't see any wounds, but she says she feels really dizzy and she's pale, so I thought a doctor should check her out just in case," Shun answered, looking at Hiroshi through the screen and then back at the seat next to him. "Well? Can you remember where the keycard is?"

Shun spoke to Anna in a gentle, quiet voice, careful not to push her. But Anna made no response. After a few seconds of silence, a strained moaning came from the speakers.

"What's wrong with me? I remember calling you and running out of the bathroom, but then... nothing. I think I saw something truly horrifying, but whenever I try to remember what... there's this splitting pain in my temple..."

Anna's breathing was labored. Even speaking was difficult for her. Shun must have picked up on this.

"Don't force yourself. Sorry. I know it's a lot to ask," he said to her, then turned back to Hiroshi with a difficult expression on his face. "There should be a blue keycard somewhere in that mansion. Once I've taken Anna to the hospital, I'll come right back. Look for it in the meantime—"

Hiroshi missed Shun's last few words. The stuffed bear in the back of the entrance hall fell over with a loud thud, which was followed by a shrill scream from Takeshi that rattled his eardrums.

"You're kidding me..."

From the corner of his eye, Hiroshi could see Mika's usually cool expression twisted in fear. He then turned to see what she was looking at for himself, and the startling sight made him drop the tablet. For there stood a strange, giant creature staring down at them.

Takeshi's wail echoed through the mansion like a siren.

"Help! Someone help! Get me out of heeeere!" he shouted, pounding at the front door.

"Hiroshi? What happened? Don't tell me the monster..." Shun's voice came from the tablet on the ground.

"What is that? Some kind of bad joke?" Mika said, anger clouding her face. She spoke rapidly in a tone that conveyed her irritation. "I know. It's Takuro! You have such horrible taste in jokes. You went through all of this just to scare us? What's the fun in that?"

"Hiroshi, answer me!" Shun's voice was full of panic. "Hiroshi!"

Shun called to his friend over and over. But Hiroshi couldn't answer. Though not because he was frightened or afraid like the others. No, he was purely in awe.

The blue monster cocked its head slightly and slowly began moving toward them. The wrinkles in its skin. The fluid movements of its muscles. The bulging veins. It was all so realistic. None if it looked fake in the slightest. Even its blinking was natural.

Just what was this creature? Hiroshi had never seen anything like it in all of the books he'd read. He would have guessed it was some mutated species of gorilla with a bizarrely overdeveloped head, shaved body, and blue skin, but that theory was out the window when it stood up straight and walked on two legs. Of all the animals in the world, only humans walked upright on two legs. But Hiroshi found it difficult to believe that the thing before him was a *Homo sapien* like him.

He couldn't suppress the urge welling up inside him. He wanted to know more about this impossible creature—to approach it and investigate all of its strange features. Of course, he knew how dangerous that was. The intensifying scent of blood as it drew closer was proof enough that it wasn't friendly. Something in his gut told him this was what had killed Takuro's father.

"No! I don't want to die... I don't want to dieee! Save me... Save meee!"

Finally realizing that pounding on the door was useless, Takeshi shoved Hiroshi out of his way and ran toward the second floor, his face dripping with tears and snot. The monster watched him go up the stairs, let out a low growl, then turned its head slowly and fixed its giant eyes on Hiroshi and Mika again.

"Takuro, you're not fooling me," Mika said, pursing her lips. "You were lying about your father going missing, weren't you? You even hired a fake police officer. What an elaborate prank you've cooked up... What's your goal? Do you want to see me scared? Well, too bad. This isn't enough to scare me."

Her sharp nose pointed high in the air, she proceeded straight

toward the monster.

“Mika, I don’t believe we should approach it when we don’t know that for sure.”

Hiroshi quickly called out to try and stop her, but Mika merely gave him a sidelong glance and snorted. She had no intention of listening.

“Takuro, are you still mad that I made fun of you for believing in the blue monster? Is that why you’re doing this? You’ve been all jumpy lately, like Takeshi. I don’t know what happened, but it’s not like you.”

The corners of the monster’s mouth lifted, revealing grimy fangs. Its giant eyes were slanted angrily, its hostility on full display. But Mika apparently couldn’t see that. She was too close and its face was high over her head. Standing right before it, she unhesitatingly reached out a hand toward its blue skin.

“What... is this?”

At last, the look in Mika’s eyes changed. She’d finally realized that this was no man in a suit. Raising an eyebrow, she quickly pulled back her hand.

Shlick...

A wet, sticky sound reached Hiroshi’s ears. Long strands of goo dripped from Mika’s fingers, as if she had just squished a piece of rotten fruit in her hand.

“This smells awful. What is it?”

Mika’s expression twisted. The giant’s eyes opened wider than ever before, so much that they looked like they were going to pop out of its skull. At the same time, its right hand swung down. Right over Mika’s head.

“Mika, look out!”

Hiroshi’s body reacted faster than he could think. He lunged at Mika and grabbed her, sending them both tumbling across the floor. Looking behind him, he saw a giant hole where she’d just been standing. If he’d been a single moment slower, she would have been turned into a pancake.

“Noooooooooo!”

Finally realizing the gravity of the situation, a shrill scream escaped Mika’s throat.

The monster straightened itself up and turned around. Its fangs were bared, as if it was angry that it had failed to kill its prey. And it was ready to lash out.

The teenagers standing before it were like babies to a professional wrestler. The difference in size and strength was obvious. One tackle from it would be their end. Hiroshi pushed Mika, frozen in fear, toward safety and quickly jumped to the side.

The monster approached, but suddenly pitched forward like it had been tripped by the stuffed bear underfoot. It flailed helplessly and fell to the ground. Thanks to its disproportionately large head, it was having a difficult time getting up. Now was their chance to run.

“Mika, go!”

At his behest, she stood up, too. Her face was white as a sheet, but he ascended the stairs with sure footing. There was no need to worry about her for now. She didn’t appear to be injured, and she certainly had more fortitude than Takeshi.

Hiroshi turned his back to the monster and ran west down the hall himself. Reaching the door at the end, he opened it and jumped through. In the middle of the otherwise empty, bare concrete room was a giant, cylindrical tank. Pipes of various widths protruded from it. Was this the boiler room? Expectedly, there was no sign of movement. Just cool air lapping at his feet.

Hiroshi’s eyes scanned the ground for the keycard Shun had mentioned. With no clues to go off of, they’d have no choice but to search every single room. It was tedious work, but if it was the only way out, then so be it.

Putting his cheek on the cold floor, Hiroshi peered under the boiler. No luck. It wasn’t in this room. Hiroshi stood up, brushed off his uniform, and quietly poked his head out into the hall.

His eyes wandered to where the monster had fallen, but it was gone now. Only the poor bear remained, stomped into a pitiful shape. Hiroshi went out into the hall and approached the closest door to the boiler room. He put his hand on the knob, intent on investigating whatever was inside next, when...

“Nooooo!”

A shrill scream echoed through the hall, piercing his ears. He recognized that high-pitched voice. It was Mika.

3

Following the scream, Hiroshi heard a violent sound like something heavy falling. The whole building shook slightly. He had to go. Hiroshi balled his hands into fists and ascended the stairs as fast as he could.

“Ahhhhh!”

There was another scream from Mika, followed by the sound of something hitting the wall hard.

Where? Where is it coming from?

Upon reaching the second floor, Hiroshi stopped for a second and cupped his hands to his ears. Closing his eyes, he focused entirely on

his hearing. The mansion was quite old, but well-built. The walls were thick, and there were hardly any gaps in the doors. And yet he could hear her screaming so clearly. That had to mean she was either in the hall or in a room with the door open.

Hiroshi opened his eyes once more and looked around. There was no one in the hallway, and no obviously open doors. He ran past the stairs to the front of the mansion to check the southern hall, too, but it was the same.

She wasn't on this floor. Mika had to be upstairs. And just as Hiroshi had that thought, the screaming stopped. An unsettling silence came over the mansion.

Not good. I have to hurry.

Hiroshi turned on his heels and headed up yet another flight of stairs, two at a time. Reaching the top, he looked up and down the long hall. And there it was, an open door. He headed straight for it without hesitating.

"Mika—"

He peered inside the room. His breath caught. The giant monster was sitting with its back to him, all its attention on something else. Hiroshi could just barely see Mika's face past the monster. She was lying on the carpet.

"...Hiroshi."

Noticing him, her pale lips moved slightly.

"I... remembered."

Great tears spilled from her eyes.

"I think we were here before. How could I have forgotten? If I'd remembered, I wouldn't have made the same mistake twice." Smiling in self-mockery, she continued. "I'm so stupid, finally remembering it all after meeting the same fate again... I was eaten like this last time, wasn't I?"

Suddenly, Mika's tears ran blood red. A strange cry, like that of a frog's, slipped from her lips.

"Mika!" he instinctively shouted.

The monster's back twitched. Its giant head slowly swiveled as it turned to look at Hiroshi. It was eating something... A thin, white leg poked out from between its lips.

"No..."

Hiroshi stepped into the room and slid along the wall, keeping a set distance between him and the monster. Slowly edging around it, he finally saw all of Mika's body, not just her face. Dark red blood pooled all around her. Fresh blood was flowing out from her hips. Below that, her slender legs were no more.

Squatted down and hunched over, the monster reached for her shoulder as it chewed on her leg. Before she could even scream, it tore

right through her skin and shattered bone. Mika's body curled up like a shrimp, spasming uncontrollably.

Ripping her right arm off, the monster swallowed down her leg in one gulp and began chewing contentedly on its next snack. Hiroshi could only stand there in shock as he watched the grotesque scene unfold. What could he do against a creature who plucked off human limbs like they were chicken wings?

"...Hey," Mika whispered hoarsely.

Surprisingly, even after having her legs and right arm rent from her body, she still maintained consciousness.

"There's... still hope, right?" she asked, looking up at Hiroshi do-eyed. "I'm not going to die like this, am I?"

Hiroshi couldn't answer that. The amount of blood coursing out of her was unreal. Even if he applied emergency first aid right away, the chances of it saving her were slim to none. But there was no way he could just come out and tell her that.

"...There's still hope, right?"

Tears of blood flowing down her cheeks, she looked at him imploringly.

"I died once before... but I still lived. I won't die, right? I can come back to life soon... right?" she uttered with the last of her strength.

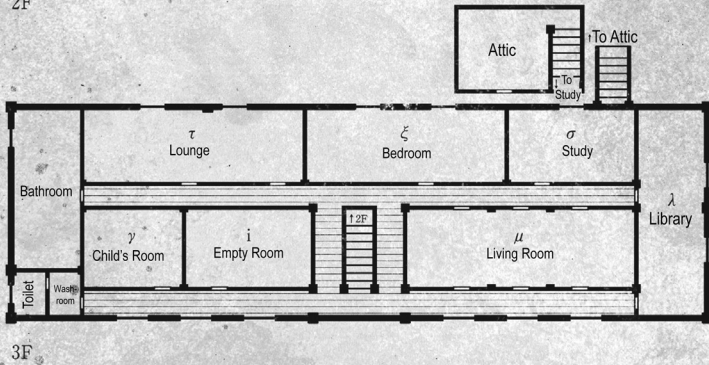
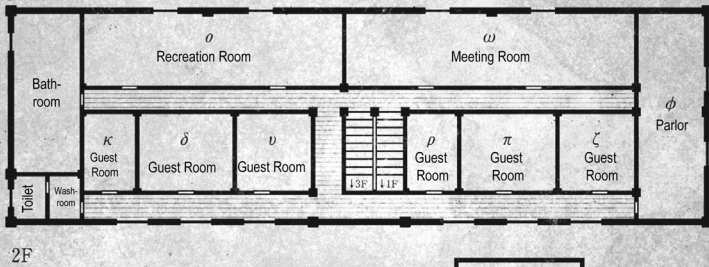
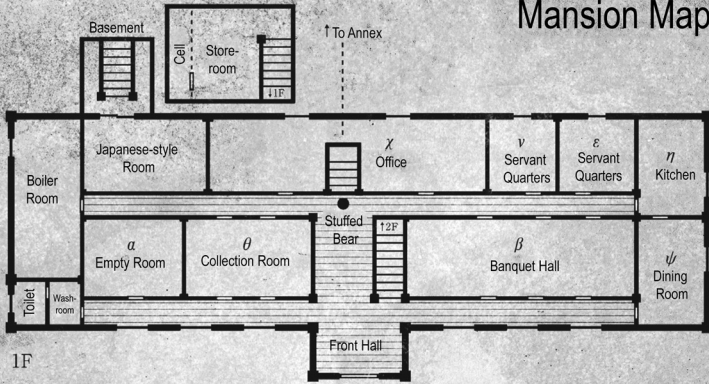
The monster looked down at her with a curious look on its face.

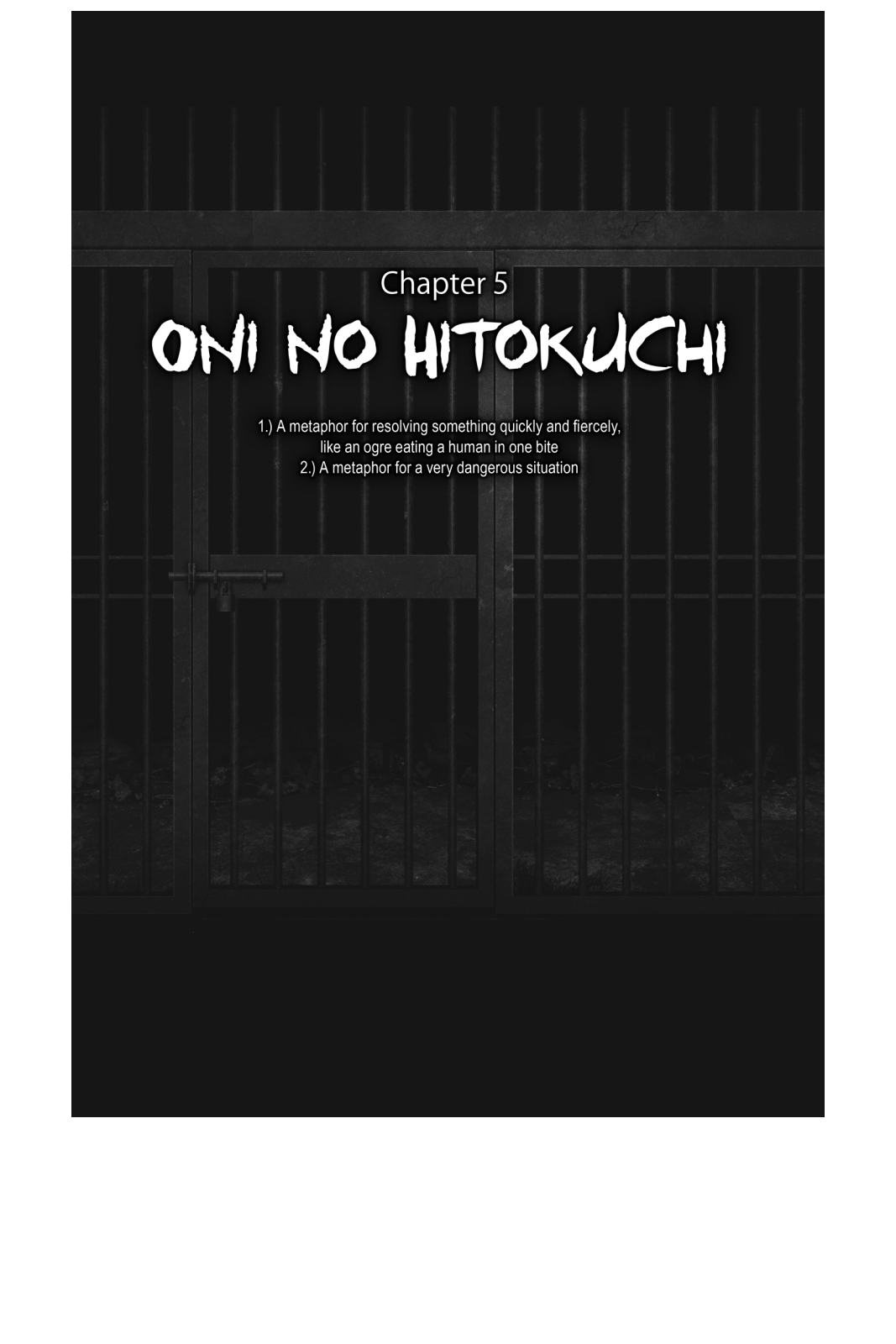
"This isn't the end, is it? I'll see everyone again, won't I? And Takuro, too—"

Mika's eyes swiveled in impossible directions, and then she ceased talking for good.



Mansion Map





Chapter 5

ONI NO HITOKUCHI

- 1.) A metaphor for resolving something quickly and fiercely,
like an ogre eating a human in one bite
- 2.) A metaphor for a very dangerous situation

"I'll leave her in your care, then."

After giving a rough explanation of the situation to the ER doctor, Shun bowed and left the examination room. Anna's expression was the epitome of worry as he walked away.

Just remembering what happened made Shun's heart ache. Turning around, he gave the room Anna was in one last glance before jumping in the taxi, feeling guilty.

She'll be fine.

He grabbed at his shirt, his chest feeling like something heavy was clinging to it, and told himself not to worry. Anna's complexion was looking much better after the exam compared to when he'd gotten her out of the Jailhouse. And she said she was fine, too. There was probably nothing to be concerned about. Even if anything did happen, the hospital had her mother's phone number.

But nevertheless, Shun's anxiety refused to listen. In fact, as time went on, it only got worse.

Should he really have just left her like that? She was acting strong, but after being attacked by the Jailhouse monster, there was no way she was really okay. Shun couldn't shake the feeling that something terrible had befallen her. It killed him that he couldn't be there by her side, but saving Hiroshi and the others from their nightmare had to come first right now.

Shaking his head to toss his worry for Anna out of his mind, he dropped his gaze to his laptop. The monitor still displayed the Jailhouse ceiling. He raised the volume to max, but could hear nothing other than digital noise.

"Hiroshi?"

Shun tried calling to his classmate through the built-in mic, but there was no change on the screen. Judging from the image, the tablet must have been abandoned by the front door.

"If anyone's there, please answer me!"

He even tried raising his voice to no effect. In the rear-view mirror, he could see the taxi driver giving him a concerned look. He must have picked up on the fact that something bad was going on, though he said nothing. Most likely, he didn't want to get involved in anything messy. But Shun was grateful to be ignored rather than constantly pestered. He wouldn't have any idea how to answer the driver if he asked what was going on, anyway. He'd probably just burst out laughing if Shun told him the truth.

Are we not there yet?

Shun's impatience was growing.

Where are we?

The moment he leaned his face in close to the window, lightning streaked through the darkness. Not long after came ear-splitting, rumbling thunder. Its roar made his body tremble. It sounded just like the monster's growl.

2

The books on the highest shelf of the bookcase were all arranged neatly by volume number. Only one was out of place. The design of the spine was quite similar to the others, so it was easy to miss at first, but the odd book was titled *Motorbike Shove*. If you rearranged the letters, it revealed the secret message, "reMove thiS book." Takuro took the book from the shelf, stuck his right hand in the gap, and pressed.

Just as it had the last time he'd been here, the bookshelf slid to the right to reveal a stairway to the attic. Peering up the dimly lit path, he saw no sign of the monster. He made a break for it and ran up the stairs two at a time. He knew everything about escaping the mansion, and that was what had led him here. Glaring at the door before him, Takuro nodded vigorously.

If they jumped out of the small white door in this room, a bug would occur and reset the game. This was how he'd revived Mika, Takeshi, and Hiroshi after they'd died at the hands of the monster last time. He just had to do the same thing again, and everything would be solved. His father would be safe, too.

Opening the door to the attic, Takuro set foot inside. He planned on going immediately to the white door in the back, but he froze when he realized something was different from before. In the middle of the floor lay a man. He couldn't see his face, but from his large frame and slicked back hair, Takuro knew instantly who it was.

"Dad..." he called out, but there was no response.

Takuro approached cautiously and touched his father's neck. It was cold as ice and stiff as a board. And that was it; Takuro began to lose his cool.

He took a step back, gaining some distance, and then looked down at the man on the floor again. All Takuro had seen at first was the body, but he now realized it was lying in a pool of red blood. Looking even closer, he could see that there was a diagonal slash across his father's brand-name suit from the waist to the shoulders. Soft, flabby pearls like globules of fat protruded from the gash.

Takuro's face stiffened, and he took another step back. At some

point, he must have stepped in the puddle of blood. The wet bottoms of his sneakers made a nasty squelching sound when he moved.

My father's dead.

Wiping the soles of his shoes against the floor, Takuro gazed down numbly at the body. His heart was empty. He felt no grief over losing a parent, nor the pulsing pleasure he'd experienced after Naoki's death. Only emptiness dominated his body.

Takuro knew better than anyone that he was cold. He'd always been sure that not even the death of his parents would shake him. And sure enough, he was calm beyond belief right now. But what he was feeling was a little different from what he'd vaguely imagined.

His breathing was labored. His eyes scanned the room. A large manila envelope and a black, leather-bound notebook were tossed atop the simple bed with a frame of bare metal piping. Trying his best not to look at the body, Takuro moved along the wall toward the bed.

A bloody handprint was on the manila envelope. The fat, stubby fingers looked like his father's. He could imagine him, covered in blood as he refused to let go of the envelope. But what was in it? What had his father clung to even in his final moments? Takuro picked it up and looked inside.

It was filled with documents, pieces of paper with cramped print filling them from margin to margin. Takuro couldn't understand the legal jargon, but he got the sense that it was the deed to the Jailhouse. How hilarious that his father had tried to protect the deed to the monster's mansion as it killed him.



Returning the files to the envelope, Takuro smiled wryly.

I'm an idiot.

Albeit only for a moment, he'd thought it might have been a will or a collection of family photos. How foolish could he be? His father had only been thinking about business until the very end.

Of course, Takuro had no intention of criticizing him for that. He'd always dreamed of becoming a man like his father. Family bonds and feelings for others were of no use to him. In fact, they were only hindrances if he truly wanted to be successful like his father. And yet...

Shaking his head, he opened the notebook next. In it were multiple ideas for further expanding the company. It seemed his father jotted them down whenever something came to him. Scanning through it, most of its contents were just itemized lists and bullet points. It was hard to grasp the bigger picture.

But one section in particular stuck out to Takuro. It was a hastily scrawled mess in stark contrast to the rest of the fine, orderly pages. Takuro was sure it was his father's handwriting. And he must have written it in quite a hurry, because it ignored the ruled lines in places and there was hardly any punctuation.

I think this is the end

Takuro gasped after reading the very first line. Could this be his will, scribbled out right before his death?

There's a bloodthirsty beast in this place

A dog? Monkey? Bear?

No, it's none of those

It's something far more disgusting than anything I've ever seen before

It appeared out of nowhere in the entrance hall

The others abandoned me and ran

Funny, I still remember when they said they would die for me

But this is reality

I'm not disappointed

I was bitten in the stomach, but I somehow managed to fight it off and run here

I opened the white door looking for another way out, but there was nothing

The ground is a good ten meters below

I would certainly die if I jumped

The monster just jumped into the room

I thought it was the end, but for some reason it disappeared

I don't understand

*Is it playing with me?
I have been given one final chance
I have to tell someone I'm here
I'm going to drop this notebook out of the door here in the attic
I just hope someone will notice
I heard a scream from a lower floor
The sounds of breaking bones
The sounds of rending flesh
The others are likely dead now
It's their fault for abandoning me
My stomach won't stop bleeding
Sleepy...
Am I dying?
No...
I have so much left to do
Where is this devil?
If I could just find it...
I don't want to die
Someone
Someone help
Help*

His father's message ended there.

Looking away from it, Takuro shifted his gaze to the open door. It was about two meters away from him. His father's right arm was outstretched toward it. He must have run out of strength just as he tried to throw the notebook out the door.

As Takuro looked back down at his father lying at his feet, a burning pain flickered in his chest. Had his father always looked so helpless? Takuro shook his head. He didn't want to see his father like this. It was just too pathetic. Betrayed by the subordinates he'd trusted, repeatedly uttering curses into the darkness as he died all alone...

Use any means necessary to win. Never show mercy to others. Takuro had learned those values from his father, and had always admired him for being so strong. It all seemed so stupid now.

It was fun to treat others like your pawns and to play life like you were in control. But in the end, it was a lonely game. When you truly needed help, there would be no one there to reach out and take your hand.

Takuro prayed over his father's body, then walked past it toward the white door. Putting his hand on the wall, he gazed at the ground far below. If he jumped from here, the game should reset. He inched his right foot closer to the edge. Although he'd already done this once

before, it was still really high. He couldn't completely stifle the fear of what he was about to do.

Steeling himself, Takuro leaned forward just as lightning flashed through the sky. For a moment, it illuminated the whole yard. Some ten meters below on the ground lay a tall man in a gray uniform. His limbs were splayed around him at impossible angles, and something thick and white peeked out from his skull, cracked like an egg.

"Whoa!" Takuro yelped and jumped away from the door.

What... was that?

It was obvious. Judging from his clothes, it had to be the construction worker that had come to the Jailhouse with Takuro's father. He must have jumped in an attempt to save himself while pushing Takuro's dying father out of the way. But he too had met his end all the same. Probably on impact as soon as he hit the ground.

"Hey, what's going on?" Takuro asked his father, who couldn't possibly answer. "Shouldn't everything have been solved once he jumped out the door?"

What now?

Running his fingers up through his messy hair, Takuro looked around. A business card case, a wallet, a key holder, a fountain pen, and a cellphone. His father's belongings were scattered about his body.

He grabbed the cellphone first and checked the LCD screen. Upon spotting the symbol indicating that there was no cell service, Takuro's shoulders drooped in disappointment. He looked around for anything else that might be of use and spotted a blue card underneath the bed. Stretching his arm out, he picked it up. On the opposite side of it were several fine grooves. Was it a card-shaped key of some kind? Perhaps he could use it to get into a different room somewhere.

Next, Takuro searched for a possible weapon. He stood up and went over to his father. Careful not to look at his face, he searched his pockets. His fingertips touched something cold. What was it? He retrieved it carefully, and recognized it when he saw it. It was the platinum lighter that his father always used. Perhaps it could serve as a weapon in a pinch.

"Father, I swear I won't die a pathetic death like you," Takuro said, slipping the lighter and card into his own pockets. "I'm not like you. I'll escape this place alive."

As Takuro issued those parting words, he took one last look at his father and quickly left the room.

S... *sh*.

She felt like she'd just had a terrible nightmare. Mika opened her eyes and looked around. She let out a complicated sigh that conveyed neither anxiety nor security.

She hoped it had all just been a dream. She imagined rays of light peeking through gaps in the curtain. The delicious smell of clam chowder wafting through the door. Heart, her pet cat, stretching out its front paws as it awoke from its slumber atop her pillow, as if to say good morning. Mika realized, all too late, that such a seemingly normal morning was the epitome of happiness.

"...Help me."

The faintest cry escaped her throat. Even she had no idea who she was talking to. Sitting up, she leaned her back flat against the pink wall. Scared, she looked around. The room was quiet. She could sense no one other than herself. All she could hear was her own ragged breathing.

So... ...y... ...esh.

Next to a toy box overflowing with stuffed animals was a red lake of blood. She clasped her hands over her mouth in a gasp.

"What... is this?"

Tears suddenly began to fall from her eyes.

All that blood on the floor... came from me.

Her memories came flooding back to her, fresh and raw.

Mika had always had confidence in her speed, but the mansion was unlike the track in that she couldn't keep running forever without stopping. There were twists and turns, stairs and dead ends. Upon reaching the third floor, she dashed into the first room she saw, locked it from the inside, and dove to hide in the shadow of the bed. Holding desperately on to her shaking knees, she covered her mouth and held her breath. She could hear creaking sounds coming from the hall.

It's the blueberry monster. It must have followed me.

She looked up at the door in rapt horror. If it just continued on past, she'd be fine. But if the knob turned, she'd dart outside the moment the door opened.

It'll be fine. It'll work out.

She continued to tell herself that.

That monster probably isn't very agile. Remember how it tripped on the stuffed bear and fell to the ground like an idiot? Its head is so big that it can't keep its balance. I can move way faster than it can. I don't have anything to be afraid of.

The monster's footsteps grew louder. Swallowing her saliva, she waited to see what would happen.

In short-distance sprints, the start was the most important part.

The runners who trained their senses to the limit so that they could respond the fastest to the starting pistol were the ones who won. Mika took a crouching position and concentrated all her focus on the doorknob before her. It had been half a year since she'd quit the track and field team, but she hadn't lost her touch.

The footsteps stopped in front of the door. Tensing her quadriceps, Mika waited for the go sign. Time passed in silence. It only could have been a few seconds, yet a million things went through her mind. The track team she'd quit. Her parents who she was always so defiant with. Her classmates who always talked to her. Her cat, Heart. Takuro. She loved them all. And yet she'd never been able to honestly show it. She hated herself for that.

Mika decided then and there that if she got out of this alive, she'd be more straightforward. Crossing her heart, she glared at the doorknob. But then there were creaking footsteps in the hallway that moved away and faded into the distance. When silence fell once again, all the tension in Mika's body drained instantly.

She heard the door to another room open, and there wasn't a single sign of the monster after that. Mika let out a great sigh of relief. It must not have noticed her. But it was too early to feel safe. There was no telling when it would attack again. It was too dangerous to be alone. She needed to find Takuro as soon as possible.

Mika stood and, without making a sound, opened the door.

"No way..."

She could feel all the blood in her body run cold. The monster was standing right there.

It looked down at her, one side of its mouth curved up in a disturbing sneer. Had it tricked her into thinking it had gone into another room, and then snuck back here? Was it really that smart? Mika's surprise slowed her reaction. Although, even if she'd moved immediately, the result would have likely been the same.

The monster, which she had assumed was too big and slow for its own good, shot out its right arm with shocking speed and sent Mika flying. She heard the snapping sound of her own ribs as she flew straight into the wall. The intense impact knocked the wind out of her.

Not good. It's going to kill me if I don't do something.

Mika tried to stand but, as if a nerve circuit had been broken somewhere in her body, her legs wouldn't move. The monster approached, licking its lips repeatedly.

This is the end.

Mika said her prayers and closed her eyes... but nothing happened. She slowly opened her eyes again to see the monster in front of her, chowing down on a reddish-brown piece of meat. She felt a hot liquid run along the floor underneath her. She looked down,

thinking she had wet herself, but let out a voiceless scream at what she saw. She was lying in a pool of blood. And it was plain to see where it was coming from. Her legs were gone from the femur down, with blood pouring from the stumps like water from a garden hose.

“What... is this?”

Bone and muscle protruded from what was left of her lower body. A complex net of nerves and blood vessels was tangled beyond repair. It seemed she'd been right about her circuitry, then. Something was very, very broken. No, it was just plain missing. She couldn't feel any pain. Or was this a dream? That had to be it. It just had to be.

A shaded bulb hanging from the ceiling shone a bluish-white light over the room that made the monster's slick body glimmer. Its muscular arms stretched out for Mika's upper half next. Grabbing her shoulders, it twisted her arms in opposite directions as if wringing out a rag.

“Aaaaaaaaaaah!”

Pain like she'd never felt before pierced her body. Blood mixed with shredded bits of flesh sprayed from her torn arms and splashed on her face.

“Owowowowowowowowwww!”

She screamed with all her might. It did nothing to soothe the pain, but she couldn't sit and do nothing. Sensing lethal danger, her body was pumping gallons of adrenaline through her system. Mika desperately tried to move. She finally understood why insects still struggled after they'd had their wings and legs ripped off. Even now, her very cells were stubbornly trying to survive.

I'd love to live if it were possible. But... it's too late.

She could see Hiroshi standing in the doorway, but she hadn't the strength to cry for help.

So... ry... ...ve... ...sh.

Shaking off the horrible memory of it all, Mika stared at her palm. She slowly moved her fingers. It felt normal. She reached up and hesitantly touched her shoulder, but found nothing amiss. There wasn't even a scratch. Her legs were still there, too, despite what she'd seen to the contrary.

The ruins of a lampshade lay scattered about the center of the room. Had the monster knocked it down in its rampage?

...Huh?

Mika opened her eyes wide and looked around. Light from the hallway was peeking in through the gap in the door. There was no other light source in the room, yet she could see everything perfectly. She could even see the flecks of blood spattered on the bed and pieces

of flesh on the carpet clear as day, as if she were wearing night vision goggles.

“What... happened to me?”

Tears rolled down her cheeks endlessly. But she wasn’t crying from the joy of finding herself alive. She was merely confused. What was going on?

She’d thought the monster attacking her had all been a dream. Yet the bright red blood all over the room told a different story—it was all real. Even the jacket and blouse she had on were stained. There was no denying what had happened.

No, we can think about the details later. First things first, I have to escape.

Mika wiped her tears away, took three deep breaths, and then firmly stood up. There was still some slight tingling numbness in the recesses of her mind, but everything else seemed normal.

It’s okay. I haven’t been broken yet.

Mika slapped her cheeks and focused on the door before her.

So... ry... ...ve... ...sh.

She raised an eyebrow. That thought had been echoing around in her head since she woke up. On some level, she realized it was a primal cry from her heart. The Mika inside her was desperately trying to tell her something, but there was another Mika telling her not to listen.

Suddenly, there were footsteps outside the door. Mika’s heart jumped.

The monster?

She bit her lower lip.

No more. I don’t want to feel that pain again.

She must have bit too hard, because the taste of blood spread through her mouth. The knob slowly turned. The door creaked open. Bright light flooded in from the hall, blinding her.

“Mika?”

It was Hiroshi. Mika sighed in relief.

“...You’re okay?”

Hiroshi looked at her in utter shock. It was rare for him to be so candid with his emotions, so seeing him expressive for a change surprised Mika.

“But when I saw you earlier...”

“I don’t get it either, honestly. But I feel like this has happened before somehow. You remember, don’t you?”

Not answering her question, Hiroshi replied, “There must be some kind of gaseous chemical in this mansion that causes hallucinations. There’s no other explanation.”

Of course. Well, that’s Hiroshi for you.

If what he said was true, it would just about explain the entirety of this unreal situation. They'd all heard the rumors of a man-eating monster living in the Jailhouse since they were kids. Whether they believed it or not, it must have affected them all in some way. In that case, it wasn't strange to think they'd hallucinate about it if exposed to some unknown chemical while in the Jailhouse.

"Mika, we have to get out of here quickly." Hiroshi said, extending his right hand to her.

"Oh... Yeah."

How many years had it been since she'd held anyone other than Takuro's hand? Slightly shy, she reached out to grab it. But then... A dark emotion that no words could describe began to form in the front of her mind.

Arrogance. Jealousy. Rage.

She began to feel inexplicable malice towards Hiroshi.

So... ...hungry... ...have... ...flesh.

The voice in her heart grew noticeably louder. A sudden, intense ringing in her ears scrambled her brains.

What? What's wrong with me?

Mika quickly batted Hiroshi's hand away, feeling as if she were about to be crushed by the weight of the terrible emotions that came over her.

"...Mika?" Hiroshi looked puzzled. "What is the matter? You look quite pale."

His voice began morphing, low and alien-like, as if someone had slowed down a recording of him talking.

So hungry... have... flesh.

Mika felt awful. She curled up where she was and unloaded the contents of her stomach. Something round and sticky fell to the floor with the other goo coming from her mouth. It only took one look to realize it was a human eyeball.

What... is this?

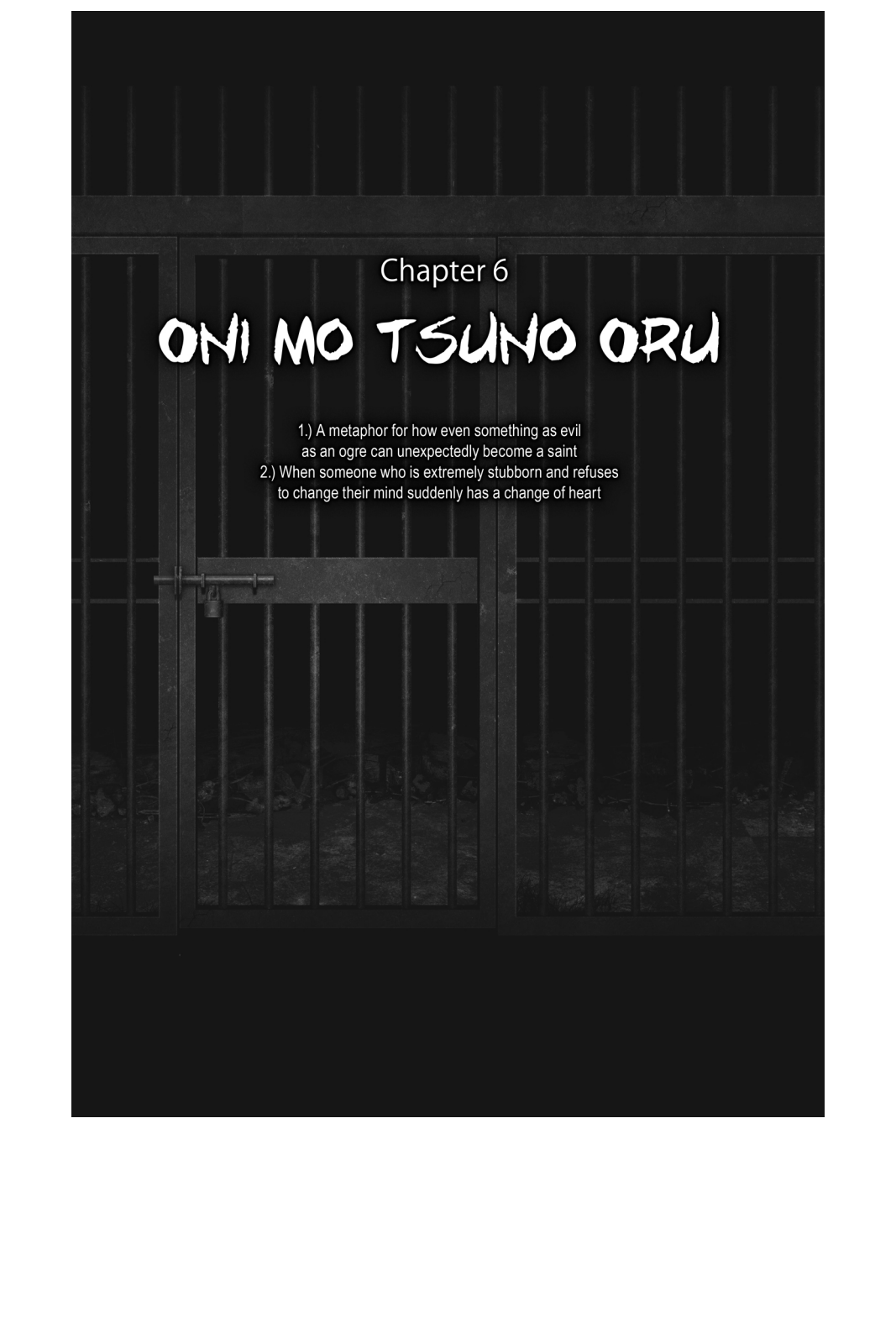
Her consciousness quickly began to fade. She licked her lips repeatedly without meaning to. Her arms itched. The veins below her skin began twitching like they were living creatures. Her white skin turned blue before her eyes, disgusting fluids releasing from her pores.

What? What's happening to my body?

She looked at herself in the mirror and screamed, practically shredding her vocal chords.

So hungry... Must have human flesh...

The blue monster that was Mika now howled.



Chapter 6

ONI MO TSUNO ORU

- 1.) A metaphor for how even something as evil as an ogre can unexpectedly become a saint
- 2.) When someone who is extremely stubborn and refuses to change their mind suddenly has a change of heart

When trying to avoid being spotted by a predator, it's best to breathe as little as possible. That was a nugget of knowledge Hiroshi had gained from observing so many insects. Bugs and humans weren't all that different when it came to instincts and what it meant to be living beings on Planet Earth. So, when Hiroshi jumped into the bedroom wardrobe, he instantly closed the door and held his breath.

The bedroom door slammed open. Hiroshi could clearly tell that something huge had entered the room. Every move it made and every breath it took shook the air around it. Moreover, there was a palpable, unique odor to its exhaling. Expelling carbon dioxide gave away its location, and that was exactly what Hiroshi was trying to avoid.

He closed his eyes, cleared his mind, and did his best to calm his heartbeat. He tried to act like a pebble on the side of the road: perfectly still and unnoticed. And it seemed to work. The monster milled about the room for a while. Then, as if it had determined that it was empty, let out a low growl and left.

After hearing the sound of the door closing, Hiroshi slowly sucked in some oxygen. There was a bit of moisture in the wardrobe air, and it smelled slightly moldy. His nose began to itch, and he almost sneezed, but somehow managed to cover his mouth and hold it in. The monster could still be at the door. It would be terrible if it had only pretended to leave and was really just listening for him outside.

Carefully pushing open the wardrobe, Hiroshi stepped out. He cut across the room, explicitly sure not to make a sound, and stopped at the door. The keyhole was a classic bell shape, the likes of which he'd only seen in old movies. He knelt down and peered through it into the hall.

He couldn't see or otherwise sense anything particularly suspicious. Even the stench of rotting meat that the monster exuded was no longer present. Hiroshi even pressed his ear to the door, but he heard no sign of heavy breathing in the hallway. Arriving at the conclusion that the monster wasn't out there, Hiroshi opened the door. He checked his surroundings, then began cautiously descending the stairs.

Hiroshi had no idea what in the world the monster was. It was still unclear how Mika had reappeared unharmed after being eaten. And now, even more baffling than that was the fact that she'd turned into a monster and attacked him. He considered the possibility that he'd simply been seeing things; it seemed the most likely answer, but he just couldn't accept it. There was nothing that couldn't be

explained by science. That was what Hiroshi had always believed. And that belief hadn't changed now, but he began to realize that there were some crazy things in this world that were beyond his imagination.

In the past, Hiroshi's first and immediate reaction would have been to deny the monster's existence. It was impossible for a human to morph into such a thing. He would have refused to admit what he'd seen. But now he was different. Now he accepted that there were plenty of phenomena that couldn't be explained by science *yet*. People had once believed that a total solar eclipse signified the end of the world because they lacked the proper knowledge and perspective of the event. Perhaps this was no different. Hiroshi had come to understand that his duty as a man of reason wasn't to deny the impossible, but rather to search for an explanation as to what made it possible.

But not even Hiroshi himself understood how this paradigm shift, this change of heart, had come about. He vaguely remembered something happening in the Jailhouse after meeting Shun, but it was as if there was a veil over his memories. He still couldn't recall the details. Calming himself with the cool touch of the stair railing as he pondered all this, Hiroshi warily made his way to the first floor.

What has happened to us?

Hiroshi set to analyzing his past experiences, turning the dial on his brain to maximum power in order to try and generate some sort of hypothesis. One thing in particular jumped out at him as he wandered the mansion: all of this was almost identical to Shun's PC game. The four trapped characters, the monster attacking them, the mansion itself. It was so similar, he was inclined to think he'd been sucked into the game world.

Shun may know something.

Hiroshi finally remembered the tablet PC he'd dropped in the front hall.

I have to contact Shun immediately.

He quickened his pace.

2

Hiroshi arrived at the front door, picked the tablet up from the floor, and carefully wiped away the dust and dirt clinging to the screen. The device had taken quite a tumble, but seemed to have survived largely unscathed. Hiroshi heard something behind him when he touched the power button. He quickly turned to see Takuro standing over by the squashed stuffed bear.

“Oh. You showed up at a good time. Gimme a hand here,” Takuro said, raising a hand to wipe the sweat from his brow.

Hiroshi looked over at what Takuro was doing and could see a small wooden door through a torn section of wallpaper. He remembered it from Shun’s escape game. And if it held the same purpose—if reality did follow the game—then beyond it was an underground path that led to the annex.

“The hinge must be rusted or something. I can’t get the door to open,” Takuro said as he yanked on the knob.

“And what about that knob?” Hiroshi asked.

“I nabbed it from the door in the attic. I put it on this one after I ripped off the wallpaper with a piece of broken plate from the kitchen.”

“It seems you, too, have played the game then.”

“Game? Oh, Shun’s computer game? Yeah, I have.”

“This mansion appears to be a copy the virtual one. I wonder what’s going on here...”

“Yeah, me, too, but we don’t exactly have time to sit here and think about it. If we don’t get out quick, the monster will catch us. So c’mon, you pull, too.”

“Oh... Sorry.”

Hiroshi nodded in agreement, laid his hands on top of Takuro’s, and gripped the doorknob.

“Ready? On three.”

“Right.”

On Takuro’s signal, both boys pulled. And with a loud creak, the door swung outward. Hiroshi peered inside from behind Takuro. In front of him was another wall, splitting the path in two to the left and right with no hint as to which was the correct way. Both were unlit, and it was impossible to tell what lay ahead. They could progress by feeling their way along the walls, but escaping from the monster would be difficult if they ran into it along the way.

“That’s odd...” With one eyebrow raised, Takuro took out his smartphone and shined its light down the hall to either side. “I’m pretty sure it wasn’t like this before.”

“Shall we proceed?”

“No, we have to find Mika and Takeshi first. Do you know where they went?”

Hiroshi was unsure how to answer that. Would Takuro believe him if he told the truth? That Mika had transformed into a monster? He puzzled over it.

“Oh, you two are safe,” said a voice from behind the two boys.

The speaker was leaning against the wall, barely able to stand. His right hand gripped an iron pipe, clinging to it like it was his sanity.

“Where have you been, Takeshi?”

“I... I was looking all over for the monster. Thought I’d give it a piece of my mind,” he answered, eyes shifting left to right.

“Oh, yeah? Got ourselves a big bad hero over here,” Takuro whistled.

It didn’t take long for Hiroshi to catch on that Takeshi was lying, either. He’d probably been hiding the whole time.

“I heard you guys talking, so I thought maybe we could finally escape...” His voice was terribly hoarse, as if from crying for too long. “Takuro, what in the world is that monster?”

“I don’t know. Don’t ask me,” Takuro answered with brutal honesty, swatting Takeshi away as he approached.

“But this is your place, isn’t it?”

“It’s not like I live here. It’s just some old property my father bought. How could I *possibly* know what that monster is?” Retrieving a crumpled-up envelope from the back pocket of his chino pants, he continued, “This is the deed to this place. I found it in the attic. Maybe the fine print has something about the monster. Why don’t you read it if you’re so curious?”

“There’s no way anything like that would be in a deed!”

“No shit. So, I’m in the dark, same as you. Freaking idiot. That’s enough of your stupid questions.”

“You saw the monster, as well, Takuro?” Hiroshi asked.

“Not this time. Not yet,” Takuro responded irritably.

“‘This time’?”

“How many times do I gotta say it? You’ve all mysteriously forgotten for some reason, but we’ve been here before.”

Yes, Hiroshi had heard this before. Takuro claimed that he’d died protecting him from the monster. Normally such a story would be outright unbelievable, yet Hiroshi didn’t doubt him. In some corner of his hippocampus, such memories lingered.

“If we’d had Shun guiding us, we could have all survived.”

That was what Takuro had told him at the end, and those words came back to Hiroshi now. The important part was Shun. Hiroshi took out the tablet from under his arm and turned it on. The communication app started up and began calling Shun’s computer.

“Hey, what are you doing? I told you we didn’t have time to hang out here. We gotta find Mika—”

“Hiroshi?”

Shun appeared on the screen. Behind him, the neon lights of the city flashed. Apparently he was still in the taxi.

“Hey, what is that? It has a connection when our phones don’t?” Takuro looked surprised.

“Oh, good. You’re safe,” Shun said.

“Yes, somehow,” Hiroshi responded.

“Did you find the keycard?”

“I checked the first and second floors, but unfortunately, the vast majority of the doors are locked.”

His investigation of the third floor had been cut short upon discovering Mika the monster, but he decided to keep quiet on that point for the moment. It would cause a great deal of trouble if Takuro become unstable.

“Keycard? You mean this?” Takuro interjected, pulling out a blue plastic card from his breast pocket.

“Yes! That’s it!” Apparently Shun could see him. His gloomy expression disappeared as he shouted out in excitement. “Takuro, where did you find that?”

“The attic. I thought if I jumped from there everything would reset like last time, but I found my father’s body up there, and...”

Takuro trailed off like he was just rambling to himself. His fists were balled up tight and trembling slightly. It was clear he was holding back the sadness.

Hiroshi could only watch on in silence. If he’d known a little more about the workings of the human heart, he might have been able to offer a few words of comfort, but that subject was always Hiroshi’s one failing grade on an otherwise perfect report card.

“Takuro!” Shun exclaimed, breaking the awkward silence. “If you use that key, you can open the front door! Hurry and get everyone out!”

“Huh? What’re you talking about?”

“There should be a cylinder with a card slot next to the door. Go use it. And hurry!”

“Indeed. Let us make haste.”

There was no telling when the monster would attack again. Hiroshi pulled on Takuro’s arm to urge him along, but Takuro remained rooted to the spot.

“...Takuro?”

“Not yet. I have to find Mika,” he said, shrugging off Hiroshi.

“Are you crazy?” Takeshi shouted angrily, standing stock still. “What if the monster shows up again while you’re off looking for her? If we all die, it’ll be all for nothing. We should get to safety first.”

It was a levelheaded suggestion, even coming from Takeshi. If they had a way out, they should take it and call the adults for help. However, Takuro stubbornly refused.

“No. I can’t repeat the same mistake I made last time.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Takeshi stamped his feet as he hounded Takuro. “This ain’t like you. You don’t actually care about her, do you? It’ll be fine. She’s fast. She can take care of herself. Now,

let's go—”

Takuro punched Takeshi in the jaw as he tried to take the keycard.

“Ow...”

The iron pipe he was holding rolled into a corner of the hall. Takeshi, laid out on the ground, looked around in disbelief.

“What was that for? My teeth are loose now,” he said, rubbing his chin and spitting out some blood-tinged saliva.

“I’ll pay your stupid medical bills. Don’t worry. You should be grateful you’re getting off with a few messed-up teeth. Who the hell do you think you are, trying to tell *me* what to do?”

Takuro bristled threateningly as he rubbed his fist, but there was no weight behind his words. He seemed to be in his own head.

“Now, let’s split up and search for Mika,” he finally said, walking toward the staircase.

“Don’t, Takuro!” Shun shouted.

“Please wait,” Hiroshi called, quickly following after him. He had to tell him the truth now, even if it meant taking a punch. “The truth is, Mika’s already...”

“Huh? What?”

Takuro spun around, his eyes narrowed angrily. He looked like an evil ogre. Hiroshi, who hardly ever balked, found himself flinching a little.

“If you’ve got something to say, spit it out.”

A black shadow moved above Takuro’s head.

...*What?*

Every hair on Hiroshi’s body suddenly stood on end. What he saw at the top of the stairs flabbergasted him.

The worst-case scenario...

For there stood a blue-skinned monster staring down at them.

3

The monster leaped with surprising swiftness and accuracy for its unbalanced body, aiming for Takuro.

“Look out!”

Hiroshi pushed him out of the way, tumbling across the ground as they both hit the floor.

“Ahhhhhhhh!” Takeshi’s half-crazed scream and mad pounding at the front door echoed through the hall.

Takuro lay unmoving. It seemed he’d hit his head in the fall. And it was him that the monster’s eyes fell upon. It was standing just a few meters away.

Not good. He's going to be eaten unless I do something.

Hiroshi tried to stand up. Pain ran through his left ankle. He must have twisted it. The monster's arms stretched out toward Takuro.

"Takuro! Please run!" Hiroshi shouted, but to no avail.

"What is it?! What happened?!" Shun's voice called through the tablet speakers.

"Someone! Somebody! Anybody, heeeeeeeelp!" Takeshi's screaming continued.

Hiroshi gulped, thinking this would be the end, when the monster's gaze shifted from Takuro.

"...Huh?"

Hiroshi unwittingly let out a foolish-sounding gasp of surprise. He was shocked by the monster's actions. Instead of attacking the unconscious Takuro, it hunched over, picked up the keycard that had fallen from his hand, and cocked its head quizzically.

"Hey, wait!" Takuro, who had now come to, grabbed the monster's slimy arm. "No way you're taking that card!"

He reached out with his other hand to take back the card, but the monster was two steps ahead. Playfully, the blue giant looked up, raised the card high above its head, and then proceeded to drop it into its mouth. The right half of its face scrunched up, and then it spat the blue plastic back out. It sailed through the air, landing at Hiroshi's feet. He quickly picked it up, but their precious way out was now broken in two, with a third large piece missing from it.

The monster bared its fangs and let out a low growl. The missing fragment of the card sat atop its long tongue. Without it, they would have no hope of escaping. But before Hiroshi could begin to formulate a plan to get his hands on it, the monster turned around and began walking away.

Am I its target now?

Hiroshi readied himself, but the creature didn't even give him a passing glance as it headed for the front door. Takeshi, who had been standing in front of the door, screamed pathetically and scurried away. Ignoring him, the blue giant reached out for keyhole.

What is it going to do? Let us see what happens. Perhaps it will open the door.

Hiroshi was too optimistic. The monster simply grabbed the brass key in the door and popped it into its mouth, too, chewing and swallowing it in one swift motion. Hiroshi could only stare in awe. He couldn't even begin to predict its actions.

The blue giant burped, then turned around again, this time headed for the secret door Takuro had uncovered. Shoving aside the stuffed bear lying on the floor, it stood before the small door.

"Don't tell me it's going to go in there..." Takuro said, holding the

back of his head as he walked over to Hiroshi.

The hidden door in the wall was quite small compared to the others in the house. Even Takuro and Hiroshi would have to duck to use it. It was unthinkable that the bulky, three-meter-tall monster would be able to get through it at all.

What is it going to do?

Hiroshi held his breath in anticipation. The monster raised its arms, nearly touching the ceiling, and then brought them down against the wall with terrible speed. The whole mansion shook, and the metal panels over the windows rattled loudly. A radial indentation appeared in the wall, which quickly crumbled away.

“What the hell? It’s powered up compared to before.”

Hiroshi heard Takuro click his tongue. The monster then turned toward the two of them. Hiroshi tensed, but it didn’t seem to be coming their way. Instead, the blue-skinned enigma picked up the piece of the keycard from its tongue, curled its lips in a taunting sneer, and then walked through the destroyed wall. The monster disappeared into the darkness, gone from sight in no time at all.

“Is everyone okay?” Shun asked nervously from the tablet.

Hiroshi informed him that the monster had left, and told him briefly what had happened. Thinking over it...

“I see... So, that’s how it is,” he muttered.

“Hey, what did you just realize?” Takuro asked, his voice rough.

“All three of us, its prey, were gathered in one place, yet it did not attack. Instead, it disappeared through that door. Why do you think that is?”

“Because... it wasn’t hungry?”

“Precisely. It’s the only explanation.”

Out in the wild, animals wouldn’t hunt more than they needed to survive. Only humans killed wastefully.

“But it did attack me.”

“Indeed it did. I was puzzled on that matter, but the expression on its face as it left gives us the answer, I believe. Its goal was to steal the keycard from you.”

That taunting smile undoubtedly meant, “If you want to escape from here, you’ll have to find me and the key fragment.” But Takuro quickly shot down his hypothesis.

“I know full well that no one’s smarter than you are, but you’re wrong this time. I know you’ve forgotten about our previous venture here, but I haven’t—and that monster definitely doesn’t have the brains for that.”

“What if it is evolving at a speed that we cannot comprehend?”

“Huh? Are you serious?”

“You said it earlier yourself. That it was ‘powered up’ compared to

last time.”

“H-Huh... Yeah, that’s right.’

“It will be quite problematic if it has grown smarter. We need to get out of here as soon as possible.”

“But what are we supposed to do with the key like that?” Takuro pointed to the broken card in Hiroshi’s right hand with a raised eyebrow.

“Give it to me.”

Takeshi, who had been clinging to the door like a lizard not five minutes ago, deftly snatched the key from Hiroshi.

“I’m fed up. I don’t want to stay here a second longer. We... We gotta run.”

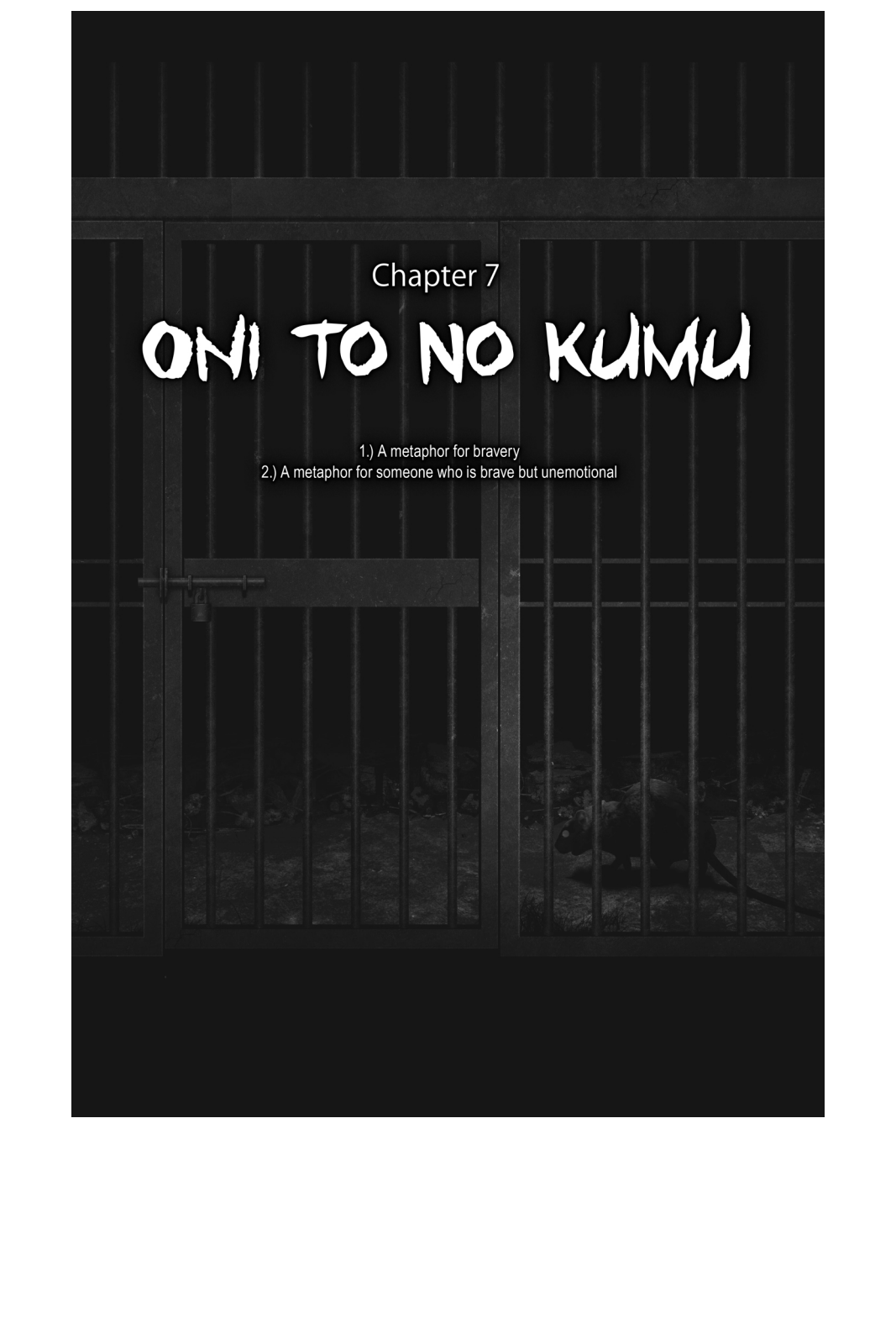
With shaking hands, he pieced the two bits together and inserted them into the cylindrical locking mechanism.

“Open. Come on, man, open. Open up!”

The key was still missing a piece. No amount of violently shaking the knob would open the door.

“Open up! Open up! Open up! Open up! Open up!” Takeshi’s shouting echoed emptily in the entrance hall.

Hiroshi cocked his head to the side, attempting to conjure all of his brainpower to think up a way out of this. Their predicament, however, was nothing like a straightforward math problem.



Chapter 7

ONI TO NO KUMU

1.) A metaphor for bravery

2.) A metaphor for someone who is brave but unemotional

Hiroshi, Takuro, and Takeshi all looked at each other completely stunned as they stood there in the entrance hall. No one said a word. The seconds ticked by in silence. After what felt like an eternity, it was Hiroshi who finally spoke up.

"We may be able to open the front door if we retrieve the missing key fragment from the monster. Shall we try that?"

No one answered. But that was no surprise. Even if they managed to get all the pieces, it was tenuous at best to think the now broken card would still properly unlock the door. Not to mention that obtaining the missing piece was potentially impossible in the first place.

"Or we find another escape route..."

His hand on his chin, Hiroshi looked at the tablet.

"Shun, do you have any useful advice?" he asked the LCD panel.

"Can't we just use the white door in the attic like last time?"

Takuro interjected.

Hiroshi didn't appear to understand what Takuro was talking about, but Shun did.

"Sorry. When I patched the game, that bug mysteriously disappeared," he answered apologetically.

"Yeah, I figured as much. There was a mangled corpse in the yard below, so I had my suspicions. Glad I didn't rush." Takuro exhaled and shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"Is there any other way for us to escape?" Hiroshi asked, bringing his face close to the tablet.

"It'll take a little time, but if you follow the game, you should eventually reach the goal."

"The hidden door to the annex has already been opened," Takuro said.

"Oh. In that case, proceed straight to the underground path and —"

"We can't."

"Huh?" Shun's expression clouded.

"We tried to proceed like last time, but the path suddenly splits in two now. Plus it's super dark. You can't see your own hand in front of your face. It wasn't like this before... What should we do?"

I see.

Shun had mentioned a patch. It seemed the structure of the Jailhouse must have changed accordingly. It would be impossible for the three of them alone to clear the game without losing someone to

the monster. With the game's creator on the line, however, they just might be able to pull it off. But Shun didn't answer right away.

"Hey, what's your deal?" Takuro asked irritably.

"...Sorry. I don't know." Shun's feeble voice echoed from the speakers. "It's a new version of the game, but all I really did was place some items in the entrance hall and nearby rooms... I fixed all the bugs that appeared because of that, but I didn't mess with anything in the original code. But you're saying there's a split in the underground path now? How could that have happened?"

His reply was quite unsettling.

"Wait, you mean even you can't help us?"

"I'll look into it right now, so just give me a little time."

Shun then looked down from the camera and began working away intently. Was he going to check each and every line of code himself?

"Hey, what's going on? Are we really stuck here?" Takeshi looked like he was about to cry. "That can't be, right? When we got here, the door was wide open."

"Have you heard of the Venus flytrap?" Hiroshi said, pushing up the frames of his glasses that were moist with sweat.

"Where the hell did that come from?"

"It is a carnivorous plant native to North America. The Venus flytrap's leaves are shaped like a bivalve shell. When an insect or arachnid touches them, they snap shut. The plant then crushes its prey and dissolves it with digestive fluids over the course of ten days, extracting what nutrients it needs. When all the available nutrients are absorbed, the plant opens its leaves once more to wait for its next meal. Does that not sound like this mansion?"

The door had certainly slammed shut, trapping them inside. Once the mansion was done feeding on them, it would likely open once more to welcome the next victims. Hiroshi had no idea how the system worked, but surely once their deaths were confirmed somehow, the door would unlock.

"Are you saying that if we all die, the door will open?"

"That is most likely the case."

"To hell with that! That'll be way too late!" Takeshi screamed near hysterically.

"How did this happen?" Shun's quiet voice asked from the tablet.

"Did you find something?" Hiroshi asked, peering at the screen.

"This is odd. I downloaded the newest version of the program from the server and tried to install it on my laptop, but no matter what I try, this unknown error pops up and the program vanishes. I've never seen this before. I'm so confused."

Shun seemed to be talking while typing, trying to find a solution, but it was quite obvious from the look on his face that the situation

wasn't hopeful.

"What do I do? I never expected this.... Why can't I install it? Oh, come on! What now, what now?"

Things weren't looking good. Guilt racked Shun as he neared a full-blown panic. He was the one most likely to know about the monster situation in the Jailhouse. If he'd lost the ability to make decisions calmly, it would only result in more danger for Hiroshi and the others inside the mansion.

"Shun, please calm down. I believe there are three choices left to us." Hiroshi spoke in an even tone, taking measured breaths in order to stay calm himself. "First, we can look for a different escape route. We have no leads as to where to start at the moment, but perhaps we will stumble upon something later. The second choice is to retrieve the keycard fragment from the monster. That may be the plan with the highest chance of success."

"Hey, egghead, are you crazy? We can't possibly win against that monster. Are you so scared that your brain stopped working?" Takeshi hurled insults his way.

"The missing fragment is as insignificant as a speck of dust to that monster. It only wants to get in our way. I doubt it has any special attachment to the card itself; therefore, I believe it's very likely it threw it away somewhere."

Hiroshi explained exactly what he was really thinking, which seemed to convince Takeshi. He quieted down after that.

"You mentioned three choices," said Shun. "What's the last one?"

"Could we not also search for a spare key to open the front door from the outside?"

"A spare key?" Shun's expression fell. "Logic doesn't work on the Jailhouse. I doubt something so simple can really open the door."

"Yet the monster also crushed the traditional key to pieces. If we consider why it did that, the answer comes naturally. Because it was the literal key to our escape, no?"

"But you can't open the door from the inside even with Takuro's key. The monster had no reason to do that."

"That is not necessarily true. I learned from your conversation with Takuro that there is a door in the attic that leads outside. If we dropped the key from there to someone waiting below, they could have opened the front door with it. And, fearing that, the monster reduced the key to mere dust."

"Hey, yeah. My father, too..." Takuro spoke up from Hiroshi's side. "When I was checking around my father's corpse, he'd dropped his key holder, but the key was missing. He must have used it to get in here, though."

"The monster most likely took it. If it had left the key, after all, its

next prey—in other words, us—would have been able to escape.” Hiroshi continued, “Takuro. Are there any other spare keys to the Jailhouse?”

“...No,” Takuro answered, clicking his tongue. “I’m pretty sure I know all of my father’s business. There were only two keys to this mansion in his study. Nothing else.”

“Now, now. It is too early to give up just yet.” Hiroshi pointed to the envelope sticking out of Takuro’s pocket. “That contains the deed to this property, correct?”

“Yeah.”

“In that case, it should include the name and contact information of the original seller.”

“I see. They might have a spare key...”

“Indeed. I believe the probability is high.”

Takuro pulled out the contents of the envelope and quickly scanned through them.

“‘Evidence for cause of registration’—is this it? Shun, there’s an address and name here. Can you jot this down?”

“Oh... Sure.”

The address Takuro rattled off belonged to a nearby secondhand shop called Antique Mart. Hiroshi had gone there many times before to look for out-of-print insect field guides. The owner was your average middle-aged gentleman. There were many rumors about the previous owners of the Jailhouse—that they’d gone mad and were locked up in a hospital outside of town, that their whole family had been killed, and even that they’d been abducted by aliens. But the truth was, surprisingly, rather uninteresting compared to all that.

“That’s the secondhand shop behind city hall, right? Got it. I’ll go there right now and won’t leave till I have a spare key.” A strong light shone in Shun’s previously unsure and hesitating eyes. “So don’t do anything crazy until I get back.”

“Understood.” For the time being, Hiroshi nodded obediently. “I’m going to end the call to save power in case we need it later. Will you contact us if you learn anything?”

“Sure. I’ll be there to save you soon.”

“Thank you,” Hiroshi said with a nod before closing the app. He then turned to look at Takuro as he slid the tablet into his jacket pocket. “Let us leave finding the spare key to Shun. We have our own business to attend to.”

“What’re we doing?”

“We’ll follow the monster into the annex. Obviously, the best-case scenario will be if we retrieve the keycard fragment, but even if we don’t, we might still find some clue as to how to escape.”

Shun had begged them to not do anything crazy, but Hiroshi

wagered that there was less than a ten-percent chance of him successfully retrieving a key. The clock on the tablet had read 9:40 P.M. Anyone roused at this hour would unlikely be very willing to entertain crazy monster stories, not to mention the fact that the mansion had been abandoned for 20 years. There was no way the store owner would be able to produce the key immediately. In that case, rather than waiting around for the bad news, Hiroshi thought it best to move on to plan B.

“Hey, Takeshi.” Takuro walked over to Takeshi, who was trying to quietly remove the keycard from the cylinder. “Give me the card. Our lives depend on that thing. You’d probably just lose it.”

However, Takeshi put his hands behind him and shook his head violently.

“...No.”

His voice was whisper-quiet. The look of hate in his eyes as he glared at Takuro sent a slight chill down Hiroshi’s spine.

2

“I’m not giving you the key,” Takeshi eked out.

“Huh? What did you just say?” Takuro’s expression sharpened in an instant. “Come on. Hurry up and give it here.”

“I said no!” Takeshi raised his voice. “If I give you the card, you’ll just use me and abandon me in the end. I’m sure of it. It’s so obvious that’s what’s going to happen.”

“I won’t betray you.”

“As if I could trust you! Nothing’s changed. I’ve *never* trusted you.” Takeshi punctuated his sentence by spitting some still-red saliva on the floor. “My tooth is about to come out thanks to you. Who in their right mind would punch an old friend like that? I’m at my limit. How can I trust someone who only sees me as a tool?”

The high-pressure situation was causing all of Takeshi’s pent-up feelings to come rushing out. He continued railing at Takuro heatedly.

“It’s all your fault we’re in this mess. Anna was outta here ages ago. If it was your father you were worried about, you should have come alone. You didn’t have to involve us.”

Hiroshi expected Takuro to blow a gasket over Takeshi’s sudden change in attitude, but he remained calm.

“I didn’t mean to hit you. I’m sorry. Forgive me.”

Takeshi was shocked at the response he got. He stood there staring blankly at Takuro.

“I decided I wouldn’t become like my father, but I guess I’ve still got a long way to go. I get emotional too quickly.”

“...What are you planning now?” Takeshi demanded, nostrils flaring.

“Nothing.”

“Liar. That can’t possibly be true.”

“All right. You can keep the key fragments. That’s fine. But don’t you dare lose them. And don’t go running off on your own. I don’t want to go chasing after you. You’re small and can hide anywhere, so —”

“Don’t order me around!” Takeshi shouted loudly, cutting him off. “Why are you always so bossy?! What gives you the right to look down on me?!”

Takeshi grabbed the iron pipe from off the floor and took a swing at Takuro with a strange bellow. Takuro swiftly moved his upper body back to dodge the blow, but the end of the pipe must have caught him. Blood splattered from his cheek, and he stumbled backward, falling on his rear end. The lighter that was in his pocket nearly jumped out as he hit the floor. Takeshi rushed over to snatch it up, and then made a break for the hole in the wall with it and the iron pipe.

“Takeshi! Don’t let your emotions control you!” Takuro shouted, but his words fell on deaf ears.

Takeshi disappeared into the darkness. A pale blue flame flickered from the other side of the hole. He must have been using the lighter to find his way.

“Come back here! Takeshi!”

Takuro shouted again at the top of his lungs, but silence was his only answer.

3

He’d thought it was just a scratch, but blood kept pouring from Takuro’s left cheek.

“Are you okay?”

Hiroshi jogged over to him to look at the wound. The skin was ripped deeper than he’d imagined. He removed his school jacket, tore off a piece of his shirt, and handed it to Takuro.

“Please use this to apply pressure to the wound.”

Then he dashed into one of the rooms closest to the entrance hall. He recalled there being something that looked like a first aid kit when he initially inspected the mansion. There hadn’t been anything like it when he played through Shun’s game, so it must have been one of the helpful items he’d included in the new version.

There was nothing in all of modern science that indicated updates

to a video game would effect changes in the real world. A few weeks ago, he would have laughed all of this off as ridiculous. It surprised him now that he was accepting it so readily. But there it was atop one of the shelves—a plastic box marked with a red cross. Hiroshi grabbed it and returned to Takuro.

Inside the kit was a selection of general first aid items. Hiroshi applied some petroleum jelly to Takuro's wound to seal it, then placed gauze over the top of it. He would have preferred to wrap a bandage around it instead, but Takuro was against the idea. That was uncool, apparently. It seemed he still cared a great deal about appearances, even in a situation like this. Humans made no sense to Hiroshi. The more he learned about them, the more mysterious they became, further piquing his interest.

No, this is no time to be thinking about that.

"Now, what shall we do?" he asked Takuro after he finished treating his cheek.

"Ain't it obvious? We gotta go after Takeshi," Takuro replied, twitching his facial muscles as if irritated by the gauze.

"Understood. Then let us hurry."

Hiroshi stood up and led the two of them through the hole in the wall. He could feel a discernible drop in air temperature as soon as he reached the other side.

"Hold on. I've got a light."

Takuro turned on his smartphone's flashlight. It wasn't very strong, as if the battery was running low. But even then, it let them see about three meters ahead. At least they wouldn't be walking blind this way. But the first obstacle was right in front of them. The underground path split in two.

"Hey, which way should we go?"

"When Takeshi ran in here, I saw the lighter flame move to the left. He must have gone that way," Hiroshi said, choosing the left-hand path without hesitation.

They moved forward carefully, watching for anything out of the ordinary. They were as blind as bats outside the narrow glow of the flashlight. And if the monster suddenly appeared in the range of their light, it would be too late. They needed all of their senses working overtime in order to sense its approach sooner than that.

"Hey, check it out."

Takuro pointed over Hiroshi's shoulder. A fragment of the keycard was lying on the ground ahead.

"Well, would you look at that?" He picked it up and smiled wryly. "This is why I said we couldn't rely on him."

"We can only hope he dropped both fragments."

"He never does what you want him to. That's just his style,

though. He's useless except when it comes to making food."

"Is Takeshi a good cook?"

"You didn't know? His family runs a pretty well-reviewed restaurant near here. He makes a mean fried rice loaded with habaneros. Mika's addicted to it." Takuro sighed slightly. "Where *is* she hiding?"

Hiroshi could say nothing in response.

Chapter 8

KURAGARI NI ONI WO TSUNAGU

1.) A metaphor for something incredibly disturbing;
not knowing what will appear

His own screaming woke him up. Takeshi was in pure darkness. He'd apparently passed out while running around lost on the underground path. He felt like he'd had the most terrible dream. Probably something about being chased by a monster again. He breathed a sigh of relief to realize that it hadn't been real.

Takeshi picked up the lighter and hurriedly flicked it to life. Getting back to his feet, he pressed on. He hated the dark. It made him feel as if he were hallucinating—like some unknown being was holding its breath as it lorded over him. He hated cramped spaces, too. They made him feel short of breath, like he was going to run out of air any second. Plus, what if the walls suddenly started moving and crushed him between them? Just thinking about that robbed him of any semblance of calm he had.

So, when he spotted a faint light before him, his heart leaped. He was finally saved! Capping the lighter, he ran toward the source of the light ahead. He faltered a bit when he saw the remains of a wall, but when he cautiously peered through the gaps in it, he could sense none of the sinister aura that filled the mansion he'd just left.

Stepping through the crumbled wall, he set foot in the annex. Before him opened up into a space that reminded him of a high-class hotel lobby. The place was lit only by indirect lighting, making it quite dim. But still, Takeshi infinitely preferred this to the darkness he'd just emerged from. It wasn't nearly as creepy. He could just imagine a bellhop in a suit appearing to politely welcome him.

But as nice as it was, he couldn't relax. Still gripping the iron pipe, he carefully scanned his surroundings. He strained his ears, but heard nothing suspicious. Only the sound of heavy rain that he hadn't noticed until now reached his ears.

Takeshi quickly looked around. In the center of the room was a wide staircase leading to the next floor. A great oil painting decorated the dance hall. The smiling, short-haired woman on the canvas looked a little like his mother.

As he approached the bottom of the stairs, Takeshi stopped. He held his breath and looked around again. He could see a door to his right and to his left. They were both of a simple design and predominantly white—quite unlike the ones in the mansion. He could just imagine opening one to find a suited businessman working away at a desk on the other side.

Was he already outside the Jailhouse? This building was so different from the one with that terribly monster in it that he couldn't

help hoping.

It's okay. There's no need to be scared now. Things will work out.

Takeshi's eyes wandered back to the painting in the dance hall. He gave a small nod of affirmation, then walked to the door positioned on his right. Without the card fragment the monster had absconded with, it would be impossible to escape the mansion. He needed to do as much as he could while he still had strength and his faculties left.

Grabbing the doorknob with his sweaty palm, he opened the door just a crack. Peering fearfully through the gap, he saw a strange man standing before him. Takeshi nearly screamed. Holding it in, he looked again and saw that it was just a bronze bust set on a pedestal. This wasn't an art museum, so what was it doing here? He checked around the bust, but there didn't seem to be anything suspicious about it. Takeshi breathed a sigh of relief, then slid into the room.

Brandishing the iron pipe in front of him, he slowly inched forward. Next to the bronze bust was a great fireplace. Inside was a bunch of neatly stacked firewood. He could feel a draft coming from it like it was connected to the outside world.

Can I get out from here?

He got on his hands and peered inside the fireplace. There was a single 20-centimeter square hole up at the top, but unfortunately, not even Santa and his helpers would be able to fit through that.

Takeshi stood up and looked around the whole room. From the outside, it had looked like an office of some sort, but in truth it was actually quite ancient. He'd gotten the wrong impression. It was as if space was twisted between the door and the room itself.

Was it a dining room? There was an extremely long table, the kind he imagined rich foreigners using. It was adorned with a tablecloth of pure white. Not a wrinkle marred its surface, as if it had been freshly laid. To his left and right were six leather-bound chairs with armrests. He wondered what it would be like to eat his father's cooking here. That was when he realized just how hungry he was. All he'd had for breakfast was a sweet bun early in the morning and nothing else since. Saliva filled his mouth the moment he imagined biting into juicy, rare steak. The juices would overflow, and he would suck them right back up. He could probably eat a million right now.

A sudden dull pain in Takeshi's arm brought him back to reality. The underside of his elbow was missing a large chunk. Bright red liquid dripped from it.

"...Huh?"

He freaked out and looked around, thinking he'd been attacked by the monster, but the room was as quiet as ever.

"What's going on?"

He couldn't understand how his skin had suddenly been torn

apart. The wound began to pulse blood with the beat of his heart. It leaked like some kind of fountain. And for some reason, he leaned in to lick it... The taste of iron spread through his mouth.

Yum...

His throat was so parched. But this had the perfect blend of salt and acidity. It was as if he was drinking warm, freshly squeezed tomato juice—no, it was a hundred times tastier than that. The thick, dripping sensation on his tongue and the inexplicable raw stench of it were almost addicting.

I had no idea blood tasted this good.

Takeshi swallowed, ushering his own blood into his stomach. Suddenly, it felt as if he was on fire. His extremities began tingling with pleasure. All of his built-up exhaustion vanished in an instant.

“Hurgggh!”

But realizing what he’d just done, he heaved hard. Bright red blood splattered at his feet loudly. The pit of his stomach stung. He doubled over and retched again. His stomach wouldn’t stop convulsing, even after he’d emptied it of even its natural acids.

“What the... What the hell?”

No matter how thirsty he was, it was just crazy to drink his own blood. The area around the wound was turning blue and puffy now, as if he’d sucked too much in his fervor.

I’m hungry.

He’d thrown up so much already, but his hunger was unaffected. There was an Italian dish called carne cruda. It was a simple affair using only thinly sliced raw meat flavored with just a light touch of garlic and olive oil. His father had once made it for him. Right now, he could *really* go for it.

This was supposedly a dining room. That meant there had to be a kitchen nearby. Perhaps he could find some delicious meat there. He had to eat something, or he’d collapse. So he went.

Holding a hand to his stomach, Takeshi left the room. He cut through the wide lobby, dragging the iron pipe behind him, and proceeded to the other room. He’d hoped it would be the kitchen, but the room was stark and bare with little more than an office desk and chair. But in the corner of the room was a piece of furniture that looked like a wardrobe. Takeshi’s eyes became glued to it. A blood-like substance was dripping from a crack in the door, staining the floor bright red. Takeshi slowly approached the closet.

Don’t. Get out now.

His heart screamed. But it was like he had no control over his own body. Only the sound of the iron pipe dragging across the floor could be heard in the still room as he walked forward.

Don’t get any closer to the closet. No more. I just want to go home. I

want to sleep peacefully.

Various thoughts crossed his mind.

Run away. Don't open it. You know what's inside... No, no, no!

Someone help! I'm hungry...

Once at the wardrobe, he threw open the doors. A human head rolled out. It rolled three full rotations across the floor before stopping faceup. Back ooze dripped from its empty eye sockets.

“Ahhhhhhhh!” Takeshi screamed in a voice he didn't recognize.



That blond hair was all too familiar. Those neatly plucked eyebrows. The low nose that he hated so much. There was no doubt that this was his face. All that was in the rest of the closet was a pile of meat. Between the roughly chopped pieces, a bloody arm protruded from the mass. The string of beads around the wrist looked just like the bracelet he always wore.

"Is this... me?" he whispered hoarsely.

It was all so confusing. Had he been attacked by the monster? While hiding and shivering in the closet, it appeared... Faint memories welled up in him.

Did I die? Then who's standing here now? I'm hungry...

Drivel dripped from the corners of his mouth as he stared at the corpse in the closet.

Meat. Fresh meat.

His stomach let out a weak growl.

It's Dad's homemade carne cruda...

He reached out with his right hand and grabbed a piece. He took a bite. It was still warm. Its juices flooded his dry mouth. It was fatty and melted in his mouth instantly. There must have been some intestines mixed in. They were chewy, but that was just a different kind of pleasure...

"Urk... Hurk... Hurgggggghh!"

The contents of his stomach stained the floor brown once again.

What am I doing?

He had to be crazy if he was eating human flesh. What in the world was going on? He couldn't even control himself. It was as if someone was possessing him.

It's no use... I'm crazy, and that's that.

He tried to take a breath and looked up. There was an L-shaped hook hanging from a ceiling beam.

"...Oh."

At that moment, the bracelet around his wrist snapped, sending the beads to the floor. He let out a sigh of relief.

Duh. Of course. I'm such an idiot. Why didn't I realize it sooner?

Takeshi grabbed his favorite belt that he'd been wearing. There was a way to sleep peacefully. To escape the nightmares. Pulling on the belt, he smiled. It had been so long since he had last...

had nothing left to spend. Shun thanked the driver and got out. The driver opened his mouth as if he meant to say something, but then thought better of getting involved, shut his mouth, and drove off.

Shoving his laptop into his shoulder bag, Shun stood before the mansion. Unfortunately, the door was locked tight. It wouldn't budge no matter if he pushed or pulled. He knocked, but no response came from within.

He stepped away from the door and, following the building's outside wall, moved through the yard. Right below the attic was the corpse of a man, just as Takuro had mentioned. Shun took out the smartphone he'd taken from home to call for emergency services.

In order to save his trapped classmates, he needed to find the previous owner and get the spare key from them as soon as possible. Shun had called the number Takuro had given him from the taxi, but they never picked up. It was almost 9:00 P.M. Maybe they were taking an evening bath before bed. He thought about visiting the owner's home personally, but it was so late that he doubted he'd be a welcome guest. He was just some random middle schooler. The best he could hope for was a lecture.

After running through a bunch of ideas, Shun thought to call the police. But even if he explained that his friends were trapped in the Jailhouse and they needed rescuing, there was no way they would act immediately. Adults were so obsessed with common sense that they wouldn't believe that they were in danger of being eaten by a monster.

But if they knew there was a dead body outside the Jailhouse, that was a different story. The police would surely take on a murder investigation. Then if they learned trapped children were involved, they would spare no expense in saving them.

When someone picked up on the other end of the line, Shun was expectedly nervous but managed to give a concise summary of the situation without fumbling. Once he hung up, he let out a long sigh. He'd only talked for a few minutes, but he was drained.

A flash of lightning illuminated the body before him. Here he was in pitch black without even the moon to light his way, alone with a corpse. Yet he felt no fear. He'd come face-to-face with an even more gruesome corpse three weeks ago. Plus, he could only think of Hiroshi and the others fighting for their lives inside the mansion. His mind was so preoccupied with worry for his friends that he had nothing to spare for himself. A corpse wouldn't attack him like the Jailhouse monster would.

He circled the mansion looking for a way in. Just as he was about to give up, he spotted a busily spinning red light beyond the iron gate.

"Officer! Over here!"

Shun returned to the body and, waving his smartphone, shouted as loudly as he could. Two officers in uniform came jogging over. Illuminated by the light, the corpse's head looked like a split pomegranate. They asked what he was doing there, and Shun answered honestly. There was no reason to lie.

"My classmate's father has been missing since yesterday. Thinking he might be in here, a bunch of us went inside. But now the door is locked and can't be opened. Maybe they've been captured by a murderer. Please save them."

He didn't need to tell them about the monster. It was clear they'd just make fun of him if he did. The officers seemed to know that Takuro's father was missing, as well, and they didn't seem to doubt what Shun was saying. They investigated the outside of the mansion, but the front door wouldn't budge, and thick metal panels covered all the windows from the inside. There was no way inside. Only the small attic door was open, but it was a good ten meters above them. There was no way to reach it.

A grim look on his face, the older cop requested backup over the radio. Maybe if a bunch of officers worked together, they could do something about this. Shun felt relieved.

However, he couldn't let down his guard. It was better to try every possible plan. Shun relayed the information he'd gotten about the previous owner from Takuro to the officers.

"Maybe he has a spare key?"

"Maybe..." The officer looked a little troubled before continuing. "But I'm sorry, kid. The previous owner you mentioned can't be contacted."

"Huh? Why not?"

"That's the old man from the secondhand shop, right? He passed away five years ago. He was over 90, so it was probably just age."

"What about his family?"

"None to speak of. His wife died young, and they never had any children."

"But his shop is still active, right? Someone must have taken it over."

"I heard a friend of his bought it all."

"Can you contact them? Maybe they have the spare key."

It was a slim hope, but it was worth investigating even the scarcest leads.

"All right. Give me a second. I'll give it a whirl."

The stern-faced officer stepped away, took out an old cell phone, and placed a call. Shun had no idea who he was calling, but surely it was some kind of intelligence network in the adult world that kids didn't know about. But why was the officer so quick to act? Shun

doubted he had been that convincing. Perhaps he believed there would be some reward for saving the son of a powerful local businessman.

Shun took out the laptop from his shoulder bag and woke it from sleep mode. He started the communications app and started to call Hiroshi, but then hung up. It would just depress them to learn that the previous owner was dead. And he had no good news to share.

He thought about just checking in to see if they were okay, but he couldn't put them in danger for the sake of his own ego. A call would drain the tablet's battery. Plus it would distract them from a possible monster attack. If that happened, he'd never forgive himself. The sense of powerlessness he felt was frustrating. He jogged over to the police officer to see if he'd found anything. Based on his expression, there was no key.

"No good. The current owner doesn't know a thing. From what I vaguely remember, that old man wasn't the type to blab about himself, either."

His answer was as disappointing as expected. In the end, they were still in the dark.

"Well, it's not surprising. If I owned this place, I wouldn't go telling everyone I knew."

He was right. People would avoid you the moment they learned the truth. Which was probably why Takuro hadn't mentioned his father's purchase of the Jailhouse until just recently.

"However, I did hear him talk about this place one time."

"What did he say?"

Shun could only hope this would yield something useful. Against all odds, he leaned in to listen intently.

"It was over 20 years ago, but when the old man lived by himself in this mansion, he had an au pair who attended to his every need."

"...An au pair?"

"Yeah. I guess kids today wouldn't know what that means. It's like a housekeeper. A helper. It was a lady named Saya. Ten years ago after she'd lost the last of her family, the old man continued to support her. He asked that she be looked after in his will, so now the shop's current owner sends her money every month."

"Is this Saya lady still alive?"

"Yes, but she's over 80 years old. She's also had cancer for years and is on the verge of death." The officer continued, his face tightly drawn. "She's in hospice care in the hospital."

"Which one?"

The officer gave him the name of the hospital where he'd just taken Anna.

"Kid, you may want to talk to her, but it's no use. She's got

terrible dementia. She can hardly hold a conversation.”

The look on the officer’s face as he looked at Shun skeptically told him loud and clear that he knew what he was thinking. But suddenly things got noisy and bright. Flashing lights appeared all around them. The backup must have arrived.

“Kid, we’ll have to investigate what you’ve told us, so we’re looking at this as both an accident and a murder right now. Either way, we’ll definitely get your friends out, so you should go on home. I called your mother earlier. She’ll be here soon to pick you up.”

Shun was shocked to hear this, but kept his thoughts to himself and nodded.

“I understand. Thank you very much, officers,” he said politely as he stepped away.

“Hold on. Wait here until your mother arrives.”

Ignoring the officer, Shun ran. He couldn’t be the only one to kick back and relax at home. He passed several officers as he retreated, but he used the overgrown weeds as cover to keep from being stopped or grabbed. He ran from the property and cut straight across the abandoned factory. It was the fastest way to the hospital.

He hopped the fence and was about to leave the factory behind when he heard a loud noise. He fished around in his pocket for his cell phone and checked the screen. It was a call from a public phone. He pressed the button to answer and held it up to his ear. It wasn’t his mother, like he’d expected. A much younger voice came from the speakers.

“...Shun?” Anna whispered uneasily.

“Anna!” Shun stopped in his tracks and readjusted his grip on the phone. “Is your check-up finished?”

“Yeah, as of a few minutes ago.”

“Are you okay?”

“My blood pressure’s just a little low. Everything else is normal, apparently. I’m sorry to have worried you.”

Her voice was normal, unlike when he’d left her at the hospital. He could even hear some resilience behind her words.

“Shun, where are you? I need to borrow some money for a taxi.”

“Forget about that. I’m coming to you now. Can you wait for me?”

“Huh? But...”

“You just had a big scare. Don’t push yourself. I’ll take you home.”

“I... I don’t want to impose.”

“It’s okay. I have something to check at that hospital anyway.”

Shun told her all about Hiroshi and the others trapped in the Jailhouse, the maid who once worked there who now was in hospice, and how she might know where the spare key was.

“...Okay. Then I’ll wait in the ICU lobby.”

“Got it. I’ll be right there.”

Shun ended the call and shoved his phone deep into his pocket. He couldn’t afford to waste any time. Turning his intense gaze towards the lights of town, Shun set off running.

3

After finally escaping the maze-like underground passage, they arrived at what appeared to be an entrance to a building. Heavy rain filled their ears. They hadn’t noticed it while underground. Hiroshi rubbed his upper arm. Unlike the building they’d come from—the mansion proper, as it was known in Shun’s game—this place was quite cold. The heater was probably broken. He looked over and saw Takuro rubbing his palms for warmth, as well.

“This place certainly ain’t like the other one,” Takuro said, breathing out a white mist.

It was all too true. The mansion had a familial warmth to it if one forgot about the monster, but if he had to say it, this place had more of an emphasis on function, like a business facility. It was still an ancient building, but the previous emphasis on European style was gone. Instead, this was more of a mish-mash of international styles. It gave off a very American vibe. Before them was a staircase leading to the second floor, with white doors on either side. Carefully checking their surroundings, the two of them first approached the open door on the left. Takuro, who was first to enter the room, swallowed hard.

“What is it?”

Hiroshi peered into the room from behind and was taken aback at what he saw. The room was completely clean. Not a speck of dust anywhere. Carpet covered the floor. Atop it sat a long office desk and a pipe chair. In the back was a brand-new-looking wardrobe. On first glance it was just your everyday office. Nothing strange at all. It was what sat in the middle of the room that completely destroyed that illusion.

The pipe chair was overturned. Above it was Takeshi, swaying like a puppet.

“You gotta be kidding me...” Takuro muttered.

Digging into Takeshi’s neck was the studded belt he always wore. He’d taken it off, dangled it from the ceiling, and hung himself with it. His dull white eyes were looking at them unblinkingly. It was clear he was already dead.

“...Suicide?”

“Most likely.”

Hiroshi answered without a flicker of hesitation. This didn’t seem

like the monster's handiwork.

"Idiot. What the hell did you do?"

Takuro shouted, got up on the chair, and unhooked the belt from the L-shaped metal fixture in the ceiling. Hiroshi held the body by its legs so it wouldn't fall. Working together, they managed to ease Takeshi to the floor. Suddenly, his fingertip twitched.

"What?"

Hiroshi doubted what he was seeing. Shine returned to Takeshi's dull white eyes.

"Good morning," he said when he came to.

Chapter 9

ONI GA WARAU

1.) A mocking way of calling something unrealistic or baseless

A hospital in the middle of the night was not high on the list of places Shun wanted to visit. Especially not with unseasonable snow setting in.

Panting, he made his way toward the ICU. He'd been running for so long now that every part of his body was screaming.

"...Anna?"

The lobby was whisper-quiet and devoid of people. Whitish-blue light flickered from a fluorescent bulb overhead as if a filament were wonky. Shun had run all the way to the hospital, but he wasn't exactly fast getting there. His lack of daily exercise worked against him in that regard. Had he taken so long that Anna had already left?

Shun's shoulders slumped, and he wiped the sweat from his brow.

He'd figured that Anna, who was always kind to everyone, would be better suited to talking to Saya rather than someone like him, who was shy and always stumbling over his words. But he didn't have any time to waste; if Anna wasn't there, he'd have to do it on his own. Shun steeled himself and headed for the palliative care ward.

He'd called the hospital in advance. At first they'd refused him because it was late enough that it was well outside of normal visiting hours, but he'd made up a story on the spot about being Saya's grandson who was set to go overseas in the morning. He'd told them he absolutely had to see her tonight. Surprisingly, it had worked. Perhaps slipping in that he was a friend of Takuro's helped. Takuro's father was, after all, a generous donor to the hospital.

Shun's hurried footsteps carried him to the palliative care ward. He took the elevator to the third floor where Saya was staying. He checked in at the nurse's station, and a sleepy-eyed nurse informed him that she was in the room at the end of the hall.

"Um, excuse me."

Just as Shun turned to go, the nurse at the station stopped him in a soft voice.

"I think your grandma is still awake, but she's often out of sorts lately. I'm not sure you'll be able to have a proper conversation, so please keep that in mind. I'm sorry," she said, a troubled look on her face.

She probably expected Shun to be upset to find his grandmother in such a state.

"I understand."

Feeling a little guilty about the grandson lie, he thanked her and took his leave. It was already past 10:00 P.M. He couldn't make too

much noise, so he tried his best to walk quietly as he hurried down the hall. It was lined with identical doors on either side, almost like the Jailhouse. The thought unnerved him, and he began worrying the monster might jump out from any one of those stark white doors. His palms dampened with cold sweat, but he eventually made it to the end of the hall.

“...Hello?”

He nervously pulled the sliding door to the side and peered inside the room. The light was still on.

“Sorry for intruding so late at night...”

Shun parted the curtain and approached the figure lying on the bed.

“Good evening, Ms. Saya.”

There slept a graceful-looking woman. According to the policeman, she was in her eighties, but she certainly didn’t look it. She had hardly any wrinkles, and could have easily passed for a 60-year-old.

Shun had no intention of forcefully waking her. He took a seat in the simple chair next to the bed, intending to wait until she came around on her own. But when he looked at her closely, he realized her breathing was labored. Was she okay? She looked rather pale...

That’s when Shun saw that her left arm, which was sticking out from under the sheets, was dangling limply at the bedside. Red liquid dripped from her fingertips.

...*What?*

Shun stood up and pulled back the covers to see if she was okay. Blood stained her pajamas and sheets, radiating out from her torso.

“Ms. Saya! Wake up!”

Shun shook her shoulders, and her eyelids slowly opened.

“What in the world happened?” he asked Saya as he pressed the button by her pillow to call the nurse.

“...How nostalgic.”

Saya’s cloudy eyes, possibly cataract-ridden, turned toward Shun as her lips moved slightly.

“Young man, will you listen to an old lady’s tale? I had such a nostalgic visitor today.” Her voice was hoarse, but unfaltering. “It’s been so long since we last saw each other. I never thought they’d still be alive.”

Who is she talking about?

“Is something the matter?” came the voice of the nurse Shun had just met from the speaker installed at the side of the bed.

“It’s bad! My grandma, she—”

The nurse must have picked up the gist of things from his panicked tone.

“I’ll be right there,” she simply said and ended the call.

“Grandma, it’s okay. The nurse will be here soon.”

“Huh? You don’t know about them? I see... I suppose that’s only natural. It was such a long time ago, after all.”

The elderly woman continued to talk as if she hadn’t heard a word he’d said.

“They appeared so suddenly. They seemed oh-so troubled, so the master let them live in the mansion while we moved overseas.”

She continued to wax nostalgic as she looked up at the ceiling.

“I told him he didn’t have to be so generous, but the master insisted they could only survive there.”

“Where? Are you talking about the Jailhouse—the Western-style mansion across from the chemical plant?”

“To think I’d see them again...”

“I’m looking for the spare key to that house. Do you know where it is?”

“I always wondered what became of them. I’m so glad. They’re doing well.”



It was no use. She wasn't responding to anything. The door to the room then burst open. A flurry of men and women dressed in white came rushing in like a blizzard.

"Move."

After pushing Shun aside, they deftly transferred Saya to a gurney.

"What happened?"

A man who looked like a doctor inspected her abdomen before glancing at Shun. But Shun didn't know what to say.

"I don't know." All he could do was shake his head.

"Take her to the ICU. Hurry!" the doctor ordered as the others placed an oxygen mask over Saya's mouth.

"Please tell me, Grandma. Where's the Jailhouse key?" Shun asked, running up to the gurney.

"Hey, you. Get out of the way!" A bulky man grabbed Shun's arms and pinned them behind his back. He couldn't move an inch.

"Grandma!" he shouted as they wheeled her out of the room.

Saya turned her head toward Shun and gave him a small smile. Her lips were faintly moving. Was she trying to tell him something? Unfortunately, he couldn't make out the elderly woman's last message.

2

The shaking wouldn't stop. Hiroshi rubbed his upper arms. It had been 30 minutes since Takeshi had told them about the fireplace in the next room. They'd managed to light the firewood with the lighter they got from Takeshi, but the room was too large for it to really warm up.

"So, Takeshi, what the hell happened? Let's get this straight," Takuro asked, shivering as he parked himself right in front of the fireplace. "Where'd the card pieces you stole from me go?"

"..."

"We found one in the underground passage. Where's the other?"

"..."

"You lost it, didn't you?"

Takeshi wouldn't answer, no matter how long they waited.

"Don't worry about the scratch on my face. I hit you, too, so we're even. No, I guess that's not good enough. I've hit you so many times in the past that even *I've* lost count," Takuro said jokingly. His face then soured when he still got no response. "What? You still mad? Get over it already, man. If we all work together, we can get out of this dump."

But there was still not a word from Takeshi.

"Hey. I actually apologized. That's a start, right? So stop being

mad.”

“...That’s not it.” A hoarse whisper finally slipped from his lips.
“I’m not mad or anything.”

“Then what is it?”

“I have no idea what happened, so I don’t know what to tell you.”

Hiroshi squatted down next to Takuro and took a seat. He listened to their conversation as he watched the flickering flames.

“When I opened the wardrobe, my head came rolling out. My body was cut to pieces and shoved inside. Can you explain that?”

“Maybe it was someone else’s body.”

“No, it was mine.”

Takeshi alone stood away from the fireplace. A distant look on his face, he mindlessly stroked the back of a chair.

“I was so confused when I saw my own severed head on the floor. I just wanted to be at peace. So I...” His voice was so faint that it almost disappeared in the air.

“But there was no body in the closet when we got here. Not even a drop of blood. The room was clean as a whistle. Did you dream it all in your sleep-deprived state?”

“Yeah, that must be it. I’ve gone crazy.” Takeshi stared down at his red and swelling right arm. He looked to be on the verge of tears.
“What do you think this wound is?”

“You must have been attacked by the monster.”

“No. I bit myself. I was so hungry for raw meat that I... Unbelievable, right? I must be insane. I belong in an asylum!” Takeshi looked up at the ceiling as he began shouting near hysterically.

“What about your mouth?” Hiroshi, who had been quiet until now, asked.

“...Huh? My mouth?”

The sudden question caught Takeshi off guard. He looked at Hiroshi blankly.

“Where Takuro hit you in the entrance hall. Does it still hurt?”

“No, not at all. It feels totally fine.”

“You said your teeth had been knocked loose. Is that still true?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, that’s right...” Mumbling to himself, Takeshi checked his teeth with his tongue. A suspicious look crept over his face as his lips puckered.

“They’re also fine, are they not?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“It is a fact that Takuro struck you. That was no delusion. Yet now, your injuries are healed.”

Hiroshi touched upon a hypothesis. He retrieved the tablet from his uniform pocket, tapped the screen, and started up the internet browser. Going into the menu, he brought up the browser’s history. It

was a surprising and long list. The sites accessed ranged from specialized astronomy articles to silly pop culture gossip articles. You could call it a wealth of variety, or just a mess. But as he scanned his eyes over the history, one repeating trend caught his eye: articles on camouflaged animals.

“I see... It’s a little hard to believe, but the pieces do line up.”

“You figure something out?” Takuro instantly asked of Hiroshi’s musings.

“No. It’s still in the realm of mere guesswork.”

“That’s fine. Just give me your guess as to what the hell’s going on here.”

Seeing the intent look in Takuro’s eyes, Hiroshi decided to reveal the hypothesis he’d just come up with.

“The browser history of the tablet indicates someone has repeatedly accessed articles and information on animals that have camouflage.”

“Who would do that?”

“The access dates are clustered around this morning. It couldn’t have been any of us.”

“Then... my dad?”

“No. If your father knew about this tablet, he would have used the video call app to communicate with Shun. But we know that never happened. Therefore, it wasn’t the work of anyone who wandered into this mansion.”

“Then who are you saying did it?”

“The monsters that attacked us,” Hiroshi boldly declared as he pushed up his glasses.

“The monsters? Don’t be stupid.” Takuro guffawed. “There’s no way those things could operate a tablet.”

“As I suggested before, they are evolving at a rate much faster than we can imagine.”

Hiroshi continued, but the other two boys just stood there gawking at him.

“Let me warn you again that this is just a hypothesis. But it is possible that the monster has the unique ability to instantly analyze the DNA of anything it eats and then transform into a complete copy of it.”

“I must be stupid. I’m not understanding a thing you’re saying.”

Hiroshi decided to knock the wind out of Takuro’s unfailing skepticism.

“...Mika was killed by the monster.”

He started by admitting the truth he’d been hiding. And as he’d imagined, that one sentence produced an instant and profound change in Takuro’s expression.

“What the hell did you just—”

“I am sorry, but it is the truth.”

He could feel Takuro’s eyes piercing him like daggers.

“...Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because she came back to life as if nothing had happened right after the fact. But now after hearing Takeshi’s story, I believe I have some idea as to what happened. Mika really was killed by the monster. Unfortunately, she no longer exists in this world.”

“What are you talking about? You just said Mika came back to life, right? You saw it with your own eyes.” Takuro’s expression was growing sharper by the second.

“Yes. Her limbs were ripped off—a lethal injury. But the next time I encountered her, she was fine. In one piece, at least. There was something strange about her. At first she was talking normally, but then she said she felt sick and collapsed. Soon after, she turned into the blue monster and attacked me.”

“Mika turned into the monster? That’s not funny, man.”

“Of course not. I don’t joke,” Hiroshi answered flatly, then elaborated on the point he found curious. “I should clarify something. Mika did not transform into the monster. It would be more accurate to say that the monster, after transforming into Mika, returned to its original form.”

“Who cares about the order?” Takuro said, his tone intensifying. “I gotta say I’m shocked. I never expected to hear such BS from you.”

He folded his arms and snorted. It was clear he didn’t believe Hiroshi in the slightest.

“I mean, what would even be the point of turning into Mika? Are you trying to say it put on a disguise in order to trick us?”

“I wonder if the monster always had the ability to freely undergo metamorphosis.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Blue grasshoppers and butterflies the likes of which I have never seen before inhabit the property around the mansion. You also mentioned that the last time you came here, you saw cockroaches with eyes on their backs. I believe these are all results of the monsters morphing their bodies.”

“But what need is there for that?”

“To survive.”

The wood deep in the fireplace popped loudly, as if in reaction to Hiroshi’s words.

“In their original forms, the monsters stand out far too much. And I imagine it is not easy for them to prepare food for themselves. As such, they have morphed into many different forms in search of the path to survival.”

“...”

“They learned of other species that use camouflage via the tablet, and accordingly concocted the idea of morphing into the humans they hunt. That way they could move about freely without suspicion.”

“Hiroshi, you must be exhausted,” Takuro said as he removed his jacket, perhaps finally warmed up. “Morphing monsters ain’t even popular among kindergarteners these days. It would’ve been all over the news ages ago if there were creatures that could freely change their appearances. But I’ve never heard of anything like that. In other words, your hypothesis doesn’t hold any water.”

No, that’s the wrong way to think about it. They’ve gone under the radar for so long because they can change their appearance freely.

But stressing the point further wouldn’t make Takuro believe him. Hiroshi knew that, and he didn’t blame him. If their positions were reversed and it were himself hearing all of this, he would also brush it off as ridiculous.

“Hey.” Takeshi suddenly spoke up after being silent for so long. “I’m dumb, so this is all over my head, but are you saying that I’ve become the monster, too?”

“No. I was just suggesting the possibility,” Hiroshi replied calmly.

“I figured that’s what you were saying. I was killed while hiding in the closet, and the me right here is the monster in disguise, right? Hahaha! No way. It’s not possible. It’s just not possible.”

He wanted to burst out laughing, honestly. He wanted to sling a light insult like, “What’re you talking about, you brainiac?” Just like he always would. But his expression was strained. His back was hunched, and he was shivering like a frightened mouse.

Indeed, Takeshi must have realized it on some level, as well. That he was no longer truly himself.

“I’m not a monster. Go ahead and ask anything about me if you’re not certain. My birthday, blood type, favorite food, my parents’ names. I’ll answer them all correctly,” he quickly sputtered out. “I know best of all that I’m not a monster. I’m me. No one else.”

“Mika was the same way. Until she reverted to the monster, she had no doubt that she was herself. Most likely, the monster copies not only the appearance of its victims, but their consciousness, as well.”

“No. I’m not the monster.” Takeshi shook his head violently.

“Then how do you explain finding your own body in the wardrobe?”

“That was just a dream. You said you guys didn’t find it, right?”

“What if you ate it all? You could have even licked up all the blood so that there was not a trace left.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I know who I am!” Unable to contain himself anymore, Takeshi ran over to the fireplace and suddenly grabbed

Hiroshi. "Say it! Say I'm not a monster!"

A vein was protruding from his temple and wriggling like a giant worm. Hiroshi, remaining calm, flicked the lighter to life and held it between him and Takeshi.

"Get that outta my face!"

Takeshi smacked the lighter out of Hiroshi's hand and jumped back. It hit the floor spinning and stopped just at his feet.

"As I suspected. Takeshi, are you afraid of fire?"

"Wh-What are you talking about? No way."

Takeshi picked up the lighter and pressed the belly of his thumb against the flint wheel. He froze there. His whole body shivered, and he let out a slight growl.

"Damn it! Why?! Why won't my thumb move?"

"There was one question I could never answer about the Jailhouse monsters: why don't they just leave the mansion? If they did, they would have access to so much more food."

"Do you know why now?" Takuro asked.

But Hiroshi didn't answer. Instead, he continued addressing Takeshi.

"And one other thing. Why was Takuro's father not eaten by the monster? Do you know?"

"Wh-Why would I?"

"Considering the circumstances leads to a certain hypothesis. The attic door was left open, correct? With the phase of the moon last night, there should have been plenty of light shining into the room when Takuro's father became trapped. I believe the monster couldn't get anywhere near him."

"I don't understand. Give me a real explanation."

"The windows of the Jailhouse are boarded and barred, shielding the interior of the mansion from all outside light. It's quite possible that the monsters are repulsed by ultraviolet light. That would explain why they don't—or cannot—leave. Fire also gives off a small amount of ultraviolet light. Which, I believe, would also explain your reluctance to come near the fireplace."

"Then what about all the lights in the house? They're fluorescent, so they should give off ultraviolet light, too!"

"I assume they use a special type of bulb that doesn't."

"That's crazy!" Takeshi suddenly shouted. "You think you can just say whatever you want and I'll sit here and take it? I'm not scared of fire one bit. Just give me a second. I'll light one right now."

As Takeshi bellowed at Hiroshi, he held the lighter up in front of his face. But it seemed that was all he could do. His expression grew more strained by the second.

"I... I... Ahh.... Ahhhhhhhh!"

His pitiful cry morphed into a deep, full-bodied howl. It was a perfect mirror of Mika's transformation.

3

Takeshi scratched violently at his throat. His arm muscles were spasming oddly. Dark blue fluid oozed from his pores, coating his skin. Nasty wet, sticky noises could be heard as his body instantly swelled in size. His clothes ripped, exposing his whole body.

"Hey... Takeshi?" Takuro's frightened voice called to him.

Takeshi's blue body looked like only one thing now. The monster.

"No... I don't want to become a monster..."

Takeshi turned an imploring gaze on his two classmates. His eyes were growing larger by the second.

"Help..."

His mouth split to his ears. From within, reddish-brown fangs glistened eerily. His nose grew hooked and witchy, his cheekbones sharp. His trademark blond hair fell out, scattering across the floor. No trace of Takeshi's original form remained.

The monster's roar shook the room. The very air vibrated as it carried that grotesque sound.

"Time to run!"

Grabbing the awestruck Takuro's hand, Hiroshi nimbly dodged the monster's lunging attack as he darted toward the door. Now that it was back in its own skin, it was much faster than Hiroshi had expected—far faster than the version that had chased them through the halls of the main building. He could feel it hot on their tails.

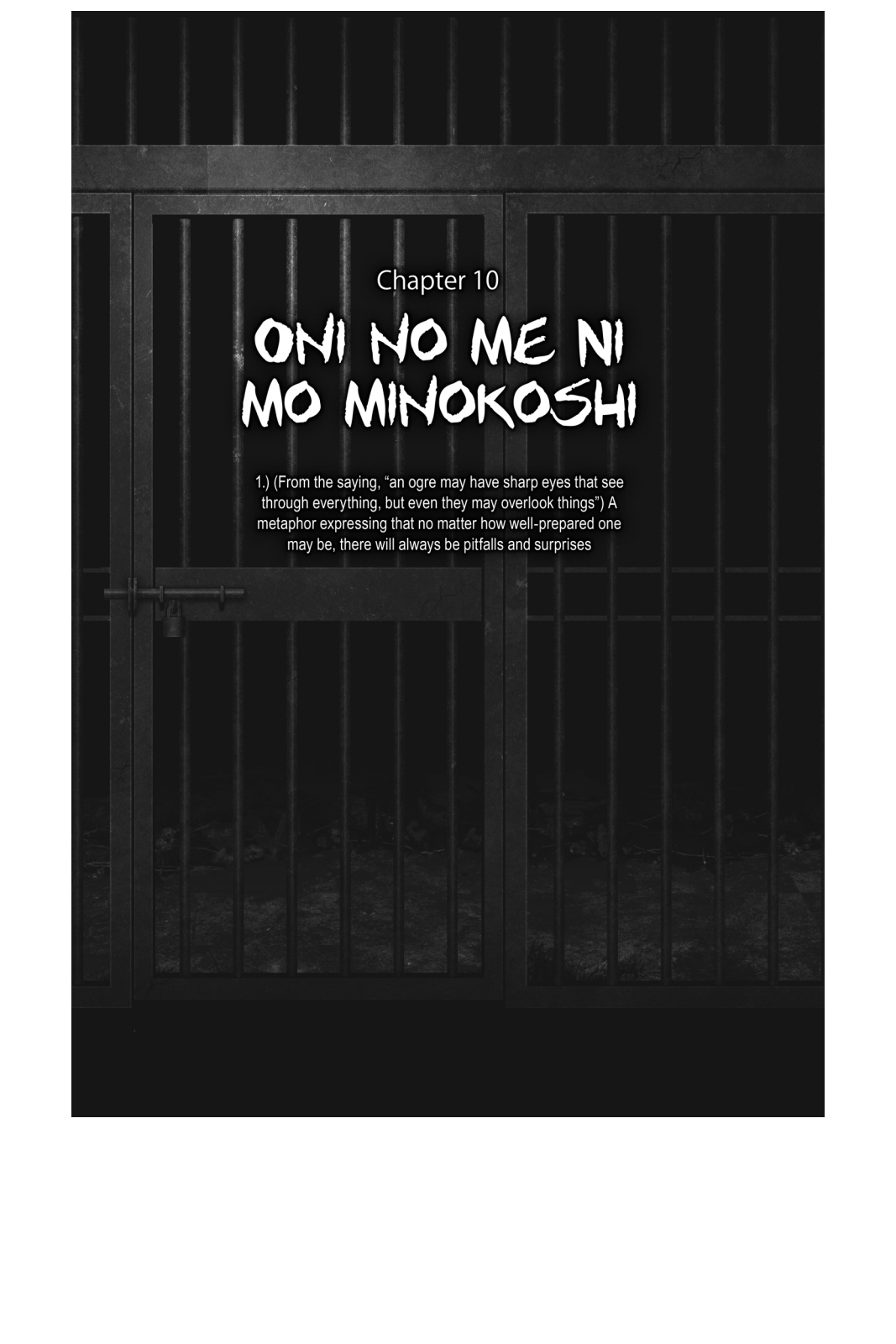
Sensing a rush of air on the nape of his neck, he reflexively bent forward. The monster's hulking fist swiped just inches above his head and smashed into a bronze statue decorating a corner of the room. It appeared it was just as strong as it was before. And that wasn't the end of its onslaught, either. It followed up with another punch aimed right at Hiroshi.

"Look out!"

Takuro tackled him, and they both went flying. Hiroshi slammed chest-first into the door, catching both of their weight. For a moment, it knocked the wind out of him. A terrible cracking sound came from the tablet in his uniform pocket.

"Let's move!"

Being dragged by Takuro, Hiroshi stumbled out of the dining room as fast as he could.



Chapter 10

ONI NO ME NI MO MINOKOSHI

1.) (From the saying, "an ogre may have sharp eyes that see through everything, but even they may overlook things") A metaphor expressing that no matter how well-prepared one may be, there will always be pitfalls and surprises

Shun left the hospital room after the nurse told him to go home. He was in a daze from the unexpected turn of events.

What in the world happened to Ms. Saya? Was it just an accident that she was bleeding from her stomach? Or...

His mind raced as he took the elevator down to the lobby. Anna was sitting on a bench there waiting for him.

“Anna...”

“Did you get to see the old lady?” she asked quietly as she got up and walked over to him.

“Yeah. But we didn’t exactly get a chance to talk...”

Shun then told her what had happened in Saya’s hospital room.

“Could it be...”

As he reached the end of his story, one of Anna’s flawless eyebrows arched sharply.

“Do you know something?” he asked, stepping closer.

“While I was waiting in the ER lobby for you, I suddenly couldn’t breathe. It’s a little creepy there with the dim, flickering lights and all... So I went outside to get some fresh air. I found myself staring into the sky, and I was a little surprised. Clouds are actually really pretty if you stop to take a good look at them... But then I heard a noise from the palliative care unit—this building—and when I turned around, I saw Naoki running out of the open door,” she said fearfully, pointing to the door ahead of them.

“Naoki? You mean the boy who died in the accident?”

She gave a small nod and continued, “I don’t think he’s given up on getting revenge on Takuro and Takeshi for killing him. He wants to see them fight for their lives against the Jailhouse monster. Maybe Ms. Saya, who might have known something about the monster, was a hindrance to him...”

“So, he attacked her?”

It wasn’t impossible.

“Where did he go?”

“I tried to give chase, but I lost sight of him.”

“I guess it’s no wonder I didn’t see you when I came in.”

“I’m sorry. You told me to wait in the lobby, but I ran off on my own anyway...”

Anna looked away, her eyes full of guilt. But perhaps it was for the best that they’d missed each other. She’d already had enough trauma for one night. Shun wanted to spare her from any unnecessary stress.

“Don’t worry about it. I should be the one apologizing to you for all this. After the scare you had...”

Shun lowered his head, took Anna by the hand, and led her outside. A warm wind stroked their cheeks.

“...What do we do now?” Anna asked, holding on to his hand tightly.

“Once I’ve walked you home, I’ll go back to the Jailhouse,” Shun replied, checking the sky for rain.

They needed to get moving, and soon. Ideally before it started to pour.

“Then I’ll go with you.”

“Huh? But...”

“I’m feeling fine now. And Naoki is sure to be there, too. Maybe he got some information from Ms. Saya. I’m the only one who can speak with him. So... don’t leave me behind.”

Anna was right. If Naoki had attacked Saya, it was very possible he had information they didn’t.

“Do you think... Ms. Saya will be okay?” Anna whispered, looking up at the light coming from a window in the palliative care unit.

A great wave of guilt washed over Shun. If he hadn’t thought to visit her, she probably would have been just fine. The nightmare Anna had gone through, the living hell Hiroshi and the others were experiencing right now with no end in sight... It was all his fault. Maybe it wasn’t the Jailhouse monster or Naoki that was the curse. Maybe it was him. The only thing that was keeping the self-reproach from crushing him right now was the warm feeling of Anna’s palm against his.

I have to stay strong.

He had to steel himself and keep his wits about him until Hiroshi and the others were safely out of the mansion.

“Oh. Isn’t that your mother, Shun?” Anna suddenly asked as she pointed up ahead.

“Huh? Where?”

It was too dark to see anything.

“...Shun?”

However, the voice that came from the darkness was unmistakably his mother’s. Hearing it, Shun panicked and let go of Anna’s hand.

“You little scamp. I was wondering where you had gotten off to,” said a second, unfamiliar voice—clearly not pleased.

Shun held his phone up, and the light revealed his mother standing next to a stern-faced policeman.

“Honestly... Can you not cause so much trouble for us adults? Kids these days...”

“Did you save Takuro and the others?” Shun asked, ignoring the lecture.

“No... not yet,” the officer answered guiltily. “Now that we suspect the killer is inside the mansion, we can’t just break down the door and bust in the place. But don’t worry. We called the fire department. They’re bringing a fire engine with a big ladder. We’ll use it to get in through the attic door, and the killer will be none the wiser. It’ll all be taken care of soon.”

“Officer, you came here in a patrol car, right? Could you please give us a ride to the Jailhouse?”

“No can do, kid. You know, I don’t understand you. How many times do I have to tell you to leave the rest to us?”

“But...”

Shun’s mother watched their exchange with a worried expression.

“I’ll give you a ride, all right? But not to the mansion. We’re going to the police station.”

Not understanding the officer, Shun cocked his head quizzically. The stern-faced man stared down at him as he began to explain, carefully and purposefully choosing his words.

“We just got a report from the hospital. A hospice patient was stabbed and killed.”

Shun could hear Anna gasp.

“You were there, weren’t you? The hospital said you checked in as her grandson, but she doesn’t have any kids. The hospital staff thinks you had something to do with it.”

“...”

“I doubt you stabbed her, but it doesn’t look good. We at least need to take you down to the station and get a statement from you.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now.”

“But...”

“If you resist, I’ll arrest you for obstruction. That’ll just make things even worse for you.”

Bringing my mom is just playing dirty...

Shun bit his lip. If he were there alone, he might have tried to run away again and make it to the Jailhouse on his own. But seeing the look of concern of his poor mother’s face, he couldn’t. He’d caused her so much grief since they’d moved to this town. He just couldn’t bring himself to add to that.

“I understand...” Shun nodded reluctantly.

“Give your phone to your mother. We’ll be taking your laptop for a bit, too. Those are the rules.”

Children had no power. Shun knew resisting would prove fruitless. He removed his shoulder bag and handed its contents over to

the officer.

"I'll tell you the truth of what I know. So..." Shun said, looking him straight in the eye. "Please save everyone. Please save my friends."

The officer met his gaze and gave a strong nod in response.

I can trust him.

Shun felt a little better.

"I'm sorry, Anna. I've gotten you mixed up in a sticky situation."

"No, it's fine."

Her smile made his chest ache a bit.

"Then let's go."

He clasped her small hand once more and slowly began following after the adults.

2

The moment they burst out of the dining room, freezing cold air enveloped them. Their breath turned to white vapor as it floated upward. Hiroshi began shivering uncontrollably. It seemed his cerebrum had immediately sent orders to his body to generate heat. The ambient temperature in the mansion was only continuing to drop.

The giant monster was caught at the door they'd just come out of, struggling to fit its massive figure through it. That was apparently enough to blow its rather short fuse. It let out a low growl and began tackling the door frame. The whole building shook terribly, sending a crumbling rain of white powder down from the ceiling. It was only a matter of time before the monster broke through the wall. They had to get as far away as possible while they still could.

"This way! Hurry!" Takuro shouted as he ran ahead.

He made a sharp left turn before the hole leading to the underground path and proceeded down a hall made of marble with Hiroshi not too far behind him. It was unsettling to head into unknown territory, but it was far too dangerous to backtrack into the pitch-dark underground path. The square sides of the hall surrounding them, however, felt like yet another tunnel. It was impossible to tell for sure from where they were, but it seemed this passageway also connected two buildings.

A great booming sound erupted from behind them as they ran. The clouds of dust that caught up to them made both boys cough, but they couldn't afford to let it slow them down. Fighting for breath, Hiroshi focused only on chasing after Takuro.

The moment they exited the square tunnel, they realized they'd entered a mansion hall similar to the Jailhouse ones they'd been

running through. Dim light illuminated the length of the passageway. The walls were splotchy in places. The refinement of the main building was certainly nowhere to be seen in this annex. The planks of the wooden floor even creaked as they ran across them, giving the place a rough, unfinished feel.

Creepy paintings lined the walls, each canvas filled with disturbing monsters. Reptilian limbs extended directly from their giant eyeballs. Their backs hosted what looked like bat wings. And beneath their unsettlingly shiny irises ran a single red crack that rows of fang-like objects were protruding from.

But they weren't what the boys were concerned about. The giant blue monster chasing them was relentless in its pursuit. It showed no sign of tiring, and no sign of giving up any time soon. Takuro took a left and began ascending a set of stairs that spread out before them. Hiroshi followed suit. A continuation of the gallery of monster artwork accompanied them on their way up. Each was painted so realistically that it looked like the monsters might jump from their frames at any moment.

Upon reaching the top of the stairs, Takuro suddenly stopped. With the stairs at an end, they could go up no further. Their only options were the doors at either end of the hall to their left and right.

"What now?" Takuro's Adam's apple bobbed nervously.

Heavy footsteps echoed from the bottom of the staircase behind them. There was no time to hesitate.

"Let's go."

Hiroshi grabbed Takuro's arm and twisted the closest doorknob.

3

Fortunately, it turned easily. The door opened, and they practically tumbled through it. What they found was a small tatami mat room just large enough for a bed and wardrobe. At first glance it appeared to be a bedroom, but the purple lighting made Hiroshi uneasy. There was some sort of scribbling on the innermost wall.

Locking the door from the inside, the two boys hid in the shadow of the bed. It was still cold. Hiroshi longed for the warmth of the fireplace. They'd run for so long, but his body was freezing. Heavy footsteps drew closer. Hiroshi could hear Takuro gulp as he crouched next to him. Then came a knocking at the door.

"...Takuro?"

It was Takeshi's voice.

"You're in there, aren't you? Please, open up."

Takuro looked at Hiroshi, who shook his head in return—a silent,

urgent warning not to be fooled.

“Don’t leave me alone. Please!” The knocking persistently continued. “Mika’s here, too.”

Takuro’s expression changed in a flash. He went to stand, but Hiroshi quickly grabbed his shoulders and held him back. Takuro glared at him, but Hiroshi only shook his head more emphatically than before.

“...Are you not there?”

With that, the knocking stopped.

Has it given up?

Hiroshi stood up, careful not to make a sound, and snuck toward the door. He pressed his ear to the wood and listened for any movement on the other side. All he could hear was the sound of rain.

“Looks like we’re safe for now,” he whispered.

Takuro let out a great sigh and collapsed onto the bed.

“What the hell was that?” What happened to Takeshi?”

They were good questions.

“It is just as I explained earlier,” answered Hiroshi. “That was not Takeshi. That was the monster, morphed into a new form modeled after the DNA of its previous victim.”

“Layman’s terms, man. Are you saying it transformed into the person it ate?”

“In the most basic terms, yes, that is correct.”

“They couldn’t do that when we came here two weeks ago.”

“They must have gained the knowledge from this,” Hiroshi said, retrieving the tablet from his jacket pocket.

“Yeah, real funny.”

“I’m not joking.”

“Seriously? That’s pretty studios for a monster.”

“We should learn from it, actually.”

The corners of Takuro’s lips twisted upward as he chuckled. “You really are something, joking around at a time like this.”

“I assure you, I am not—”

“I get it, okay? The monster used the tablet to study and learned some magic trick to turn itself into a human. One ate a cowardly boy and became Takeshi. Another ate a cute girl and...” The smile faded from Takuro’s face. “Mika’s really gone, isn’t she?”

“Yes, I’m sorry to say.”

“Damn it! What the hell is this?” Unable to contain his emotions, Takuro slammed his fist into the bed. “Not even some snot-nosed kid would believe this crap. What’s going on? Have we lost our freaking minds?”

“Please calm down.”

Hiroshi put his hand on Takuro’s shoulder. He could feel the

uncertainty through his palm.

"I understand how you feel, but try to stay calm for now. If you fall into despair, it is all over."

"I know that." Takuro put a hand to his chest and took a few deep breaths. "I'm all right now... Okay, so if we're gonna do this rationally, first things first. Where are we? Are we still inside the Jailhouse?"

"Most likely," Hiroshi replied simply. "If I were to put it in terms of Shun's game, I would say this is possibly a detachment of the annex."

"But this doesn't match the layout of his game. He said he only added a few items to the entrance hall, so what is this place?"

"That... I do not know."

"And what were those creepy paintings on the walls? More of the monster's friends?"

"I don't know that, either. Shall we investigate?"

Hiroshi pressed the tablet's power button, but the screen didn't light up. It had likely broken when he slammed into the dining room door.

"No good. It won't turn on." Hiroshi sighed and put away the tablet.

"So, what now?" Takuro's voice was becoming shrill. "Now we can't even rely on Shun for help. We definitely need that keycard to get out of here, but we couldn't find the other piece Takeshi was supposed to have. If the monster ate it along with him, then we're completely screwed."

"No, I believe it still exists."

"What makes you think that?"

"Takeshi was wearing the exact same clothes he was wearing before he died. It seems the monster copied everything about its ingested prey, organic and inorganic alike. As such, it should have replicated the keycard fragment along with Takeshi's other possessions."

"But he didn't have it on him."

"Perhaps, fearing we would steal it, he hid it somewhere?"

It was a very real possibility.

"I see... In that case, let's go find it." Takuro stood up and strode boldly toward the door.

"Wait, please. It's dangerous to leave the room at present."

Hiroshi stood before the door, blocking Takuro's path. "Unlike the mansion with its myriad of rooms, this building is rather small. If we encounter the monster again, where would we run? There are only so many rooms we can hide in. It's too dangerous to explore this area willy-nilly."

“Then what? Do we just stay in here forever?”

“There is one thing I’m curious about...” Hiroshi answered, stepping away from the door and approaching the innermost wall of the room.

He had no idea what the scribbles there meant. It looked as if someone had written across the entire wall with blue magic marker, then painted over the whole thing.

“What do you think this is?” Hiroshi asked, still studying the wall.

“Graffiti. Other than that, I can’t tell. In Shun’s game, there was a four-digit code hidden in something like that. Can you figure it out?”

“I doubt there is any meaning to the graffiti itself.” His hand on his chin, Hiroshi continued, “But I found myself thinking back to when we first entered this place. The floor below us seemed much bigger than this one.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“That there may be more to it. Perhaps another room beyond this wall.”

“But there’s no door.”

“This graffiti is a bit unnatural, no?” he said, pointing to a section of the wall.

The right-hand side of the chaotically scrawled scribbles stopped in a neat, straight line.

“Yeah, you’re right. It’s like someone put wallpaper over top of—oh.” Takuro seemed to realize something midsentence.

“Indeed, it’s just like when we found the underground passage. Let’s try peeling the wallpaper back.”

Hiroshi took the sharp plate fragment from Takuro, pressed the point of it against the wall, and drew it down vertically. The sliced wallpaper revealed a door.

“Here we are.”

Hiroshi turned to Takuro with his discovery, but he didn’t look excited for some reason.

“What is the matter?”

“That door doesn’t have a knob. The one to this room looks like we could remove it and use it, but...” His face scrunched up like he’d just swallowed something bitter. “We’d need the screwdriver for that, and I can’t find it. I must have dropped it when the monster attacked us in the entrance hall.”

“Perhaps there is something else we can use instead.”

Hiroshi approached the wardrobe and opened the door, but it was empty. Even looking around the room together, neither he nor Takuro could find anything to work as a replacement screwdriver. Hiroshi tried manually getting the doorknob off the door to the room, but the screws were too tightly nestled in the plate to budge.

“There was another room opposite this one, correct? We should investigate there.”

“I thought you said not to leave the room.”

“The situation has changed.”

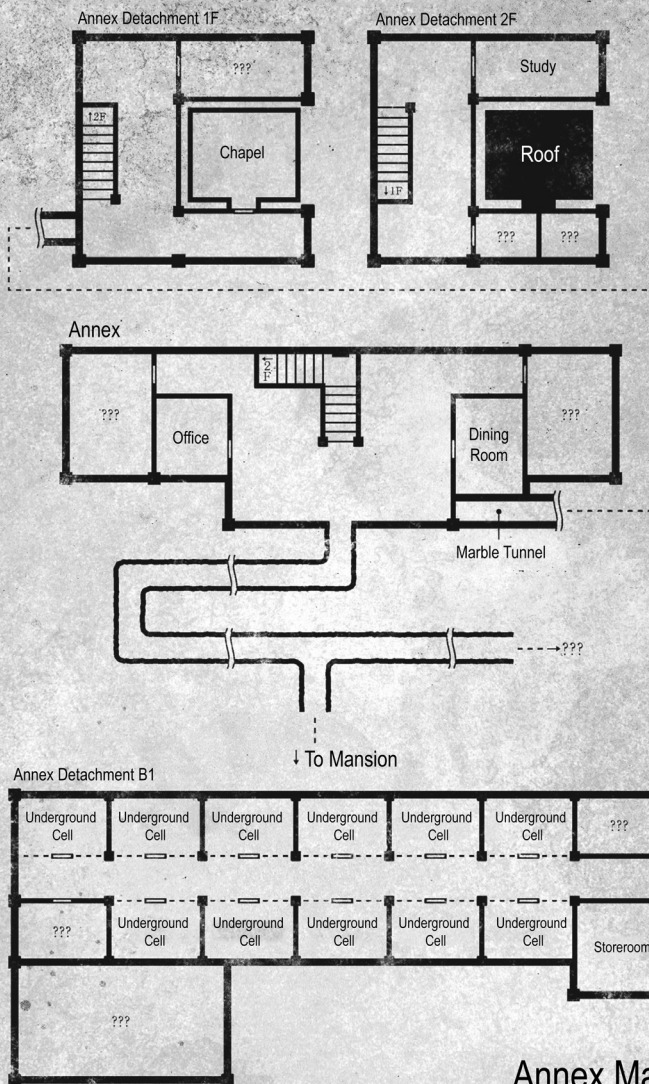
Hiroshi's answer made Takuro grin slightly.

“I thought you were all about logic, but you're surprisingly rash at times.”

“Humans are very hard to understand creatures,” Hiroshi said as he opened the door and left.

“You're surprisingly rash at times.”

What Takuro said echoed in Hiroshi's head. They certainly weren't words of praise, but a warm feeling rose up in his chest nevertheless.



Annex Map

Chapter 11

ONI NO SORANENBUTSU

1.) When a merciless, evil person pretends to be
compassionate; also, acting uncharacteristically admirable.
Often shortened to "oni no nenbutsu"

The second floor of the annex detachment.

Proceeding down the hall, Hiroshi and Takuro moved into the other room. An antique-looking bookshelf and desk greeted them. The room would have had a calming vibe to it if not for the unsettling purple light ruining everything. There was no way for anyone to read a book peacefully in here. Then there was the matter of the creepy paintings decorating the walls. Eyeball monsters glared at them from all around.

"These were in the hall, too. What are they? They're so disgusting," Takuro raised an eyebrow as he looked around.

"They look like demons from a guide to sorcery that was popular in Europe from the late Middle Ages to the nineteenth century," Hiroshi answered, inching his face closer to one of them.

An iron stench assaulted his olfactory organs. Perhaps there was blood mixed in with the paint.

"Hey, I remember seeing these in the notebook my father left behind," Takuro said, scratching at the gauze on his cheek as if it was beginning to bother him.

"Can you remember more about the notebook?"

"He wrote, 'I have so much left to do. Where is this devil? If I could just find it.' Stuff like that."

"Hmm, that is curious."

Takuro crossed his arms and shifted his gaze back to the paintings on the walls. Perhaps the reason his father had bought the property despite the rumors of a monster lay hidden somewhere within the mansion.

"Hey. We don't have time to sit around culturing ourselves. If we don't hurry it up, the monster's gonna show up again," Takuro said irritably.

Hiroshi had been staring intently at the canvas for quite some time now. Long enough to push Takuro over the edge.

"...Oh, yes. Right."

It was true that this certainly wasn't the time to get lost in thought about the hellish monster depicted in the artwork. Hiroshi had a bad habit of becoming fixated on anything that caught his attention, causing him to lose sight of all else. And that could prove fatal in this situation.

Hiroshi berated himself as he stepped away from the wall. Heading to the side of the room opposite Takuro, he began looking for something that could serve as a screwdriver. First he checked the

bookshelf. On the spine of one particular book were foreign letters that formed the shape of a crawling snail. He had no idea what they said. In fact, he couldn't even determine the language of the writing.

At the end of the bookshelf, however, was a pleasant surprise: a flashlight. He flipped the switch on it, and a white light spilled forth from the lens. This could be useful for their trip back through the underground path. Hiroshi put it in his pocket.

"How about this?" Takuro called from the other side of the room.

He'd been searching the desk drawers, and was currently holding up a box cutter in his right hand. It very well might work as a replacement screwdriver.

"Good idea. Let's go try it."

Not a moment after those words left Hiroshi's mouth, a strange noise came from the corner of the room. His eyes immediately shifted to the source. A small cat had jumped out from the shadow of the bookshelf. Its eyes were not freakishly large, nor was its fur blue. It was just a normal mixed-breed cat. How had it gotten in here? The cat slipped past Hiroshi's feet, jumped atop another bookshelf, and disappeared through a tiny crack in the ceiling.

"Yeesh... Don't scare me like that." Takuro breathed a sigh of relief.

Hiroshi's heart was racing, too. He thought nothing could faze him, but after coming to this mansion, he'd become quite the coward. He made to move the corners of his mouth and give Takuro a smile when a strange creature appeared from the shadow of the bookshelf. This time it was no cat.

"..."

The shock of it was so great that Hiroshi couldn't say a word. Its slick and gleaming skin was blue. The fangs in its mouth curved inward. There was no doubt it was related to the monsters that were relentlessly pursuing them. But this one looked unlike anything they'd seen so far. At around 50 centimeters tall, the monster stood there with its fangs bared and its beady, rabbit-like eyes trained on Hiroshi.

"Wh-What is that?" Takuro asked fearfully.

Hiroshi stared back at the monster. The monsters so far, though they all radiated the same vicious aura, were at least still somewhat humanoid in form. The creature standing before Hiroshi now, however, looked like no animal he knew of—human or otherwise. Short arms and legs sprouted from its angular body. Eyes and a mouth dotted the area that appeared to be its torso. It had no chest, neck, or head to speak of. The only thing Hiroshi could think of to liken it to was an animated, possessed block.

Its round eyes looked left and right. It was almost cute in its own way, but they couldn't afford to let their guard down just because it

was small. Piranhas were small, too, after all. And the rows of sharp fangs in this odd monster's mouth were quite clearly enough to fatally wound someone.

The longer Hiroshi looked at it, the stranger the creature seemed to him. Was it a vertebrate? Where were its intestines? Could it right itself after falling down with those stubby limbs? His curiosity was piqued, but now was not the time to study it closely.

"We need to go, Takuro—"

He looked away from the monster for a second. That was a mistake.

"Hey, Hiroshi!" Takuro called to him, his expression stiff.

Pain ran up Hiroshi's right leg. He looked down at his feet to see that the small monster had chomped into his calf. The curious beast squeaked like a mouse as it moved its mouth.

"Hiroshi, don't move!"

Takuro vaulted over the desk. He raised his right hand high and then brought down the box cutter on the monster, stabbing it in the eye. It let out a high-pitched scream like a supersonic wave and jumped back. Fresh, bright red blood dripped from Hiroshi's leg where its fangs had sunk in.

"Can you run?" Takuro asked.

"Yes, most likely."

It hurt, but the wound wasn't all that deep.

"Then hurry!"

They both fled the room. As they shut the door behind them, they heard the sound of the monster slamming into it. Dragging his right foot, Hiroshi followed Takuro down the hall. They could hear the door being beaten down with every step they took. Just how much power did that little creature have? Hiroshi glanced behind him and saw it coming straight for them, the box cutter still protruding from its right eye. Its legs carried it at an unthinkable speed compared to the other monsters.

Stabbing it in the eye must have made it mad, because the monster ran right past Hiroshi for Takuro. Jumping higher than even the cat had, it flew toward his face. He reflexively brought up his right arm to defend himself, and the monster happily bit down. Blood flew everywhere like a juicy piece of fruit had just exploded. The monster's mouth began moving far faster than the eye could follow. It was like a squirrel nibbling on a walnut at hyperspeed. The delicacy of choice was just Takuro's arm.

The sound of fangs scraping against bone echoed down the hallway. This was nothing like when it had bitten into Hiroshi's calf. Perhaps that had just been its way of playing around, similar to the way a puppy might nip your hand.

“Let go! I said let go, you bastard!”

Anger filled Takuro’s face as he desperately swung his arm around. But the monster clung to him with its stumpy arms, determined to not let go. Its fangs continued to mercilessly stab at him over and over.

“Ow! Stop it! Uwah—waaahh!”

Hiroshi grabbed the monster with both hands and tried to pull it off Takuro. Unfortunately, its body was slick like a sea cucumber’s and easily slipped from his grasp.

“Ahhhhhhhh!”

Takuro’s screams shook his eardrums. He had to do something.

Hiroshi pulled out the plate fragment he’d been keeping in his pocket and drove it into the monster’s back. A strange blue liquid spilled out of it and pooled into the puddle of Takuro’s blood already on the floor, staining his shoes the same strange ultraviolet color of the lighting in this part of the mansion.

The monster ceased its attack on Takuro and turned its attention to Hiroshi. The box cutter fell from its right eye and impaled itself in the floor. The monster’s vertically narrowed eyes were just like those of a snake staring down its prey.

The small beast bared its bloody fangs and leaped at Hiroshi. Its speed was terrifying. He tried to evade to the side, but his wounded right leg was too weak to move.

No! Is this the end?

He prepared to meet his maker. But the small monster let out a short cry and landed on the floor. Then it scurried away back to the previous room.

What just happened?

Hiroshi cocked his head quizzically and looked at the door with the monster-sized hole in it.

“...Mika?” he heard Takuro say from behind him.

He turned around and followed Takuro’s gaze. Mika was indeed silently making her way up the stairs.

No, that’s not her. Don’t make that mistake.

Hiroshi shook his head. The small monster had appeared to have run off in fright. And the reason... was her.

2

Sometimes it takes losing something to realize how precious it is. For Takuro, that was Mika.

Takuro had always been the center of attention. The adults praised him as a great student. He was the popular kid in class. The

cool guy. No one ever had anything bad to say about him. And yet he always felt alone.

The reason was obvious. He only thought of other people as pawns in a game, and no one ever seriously tried to challenge him. They knew what he was really like; they just pretended they didn't. They considered it dangerous to have him as an enemy, so instead they tried to curry his favor. The adults only praised him because they wanted to have an in with his father, the most powerful man in town. Everyone wanted to be close to him, but no one ever really wanted to be his friend.

Except for Mika. She was different. She was the only one who truly loved him. Sometimes she would pointedly say things to make him angry. It was irritating, but he now realized she only said those things because she genuinely cared for him.

And he had betrayed her. The last time they'd gotten trapped in the Jailhouse, he'd used her as a human shield to escape from the monster. He still couldn't forget her expression as he pushed her. There was no way he would make the same mistake again. Especially after witnessing the pathetic end his father had met.

"You okay?" Mika asked, drawing her face closer. "That's a nasty wound."

It wasn't until she said something that Takuro finally realized the extent of the damage he'd taken from the monster's "nibbling." A gaping section of his forearm was horribly gouged. He could see bone through muscle fibers. It was serious enough that it was a miracle he hadn't passed out yet. Was it all the adrenaline pumping through his body? He felt pain, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle.

"Did the monster do this? We have to stop the bleeding. Sit there," she said, taking off her coat and wrapping it around his arm.

"Takuro, we need to run."

Takuro turned his head when he heard Hiroshi's warning. He was standing there with the box cutter pointed at them.

"That is not Mika."

"What're you talking about?" Takuro snorted and laughed. "It clearly is. Are you so scared that your brain short-circuited?"

"Remember what happened to Takeshi. He looked just like his old self until he revealed his true form."

"Hiroshi... What're you talking about?" Mika asked, a look of confusion on her face.

"Mika, look at me," Hiroshi said, shining the flashlight in her eyes.

She blinked her eyes a few times, but that was it. There was no violent reaction like a werewolf catching a glimpse of the full moon. She simply looked bewildered.

"I thought as much."

However, Hiroshi seemed to have come to some sort of conclusion. He shook his head as he pocketed the flashlight.

"Mika is dead. You aren't Mika. You're a monster with Mika's memories."

"...Huh?"

"Heh, don't worry about him. He's just a bit rattled," said Takuro, smiling reassuringly as unease clouded Mika's face. "More importantly, where have you been this whole time? I was worried."

"I don't really know. I sort of remember being attacked by a blueberry-colored monster in a child's room..."

"It is possible that the monster has the unique ability to instantly analyze the DNA of anything it eats and then transform into a complete copy of it."

Hiroshi's words resurfaced in Takuro's mind. He studied Mika's face. Could it really be? No, that was ridiculous. Her skin was white and smooth. Her lips were glossy. Her tiny dimples were even there when she smiled. There was no way she was a monster.

"When I came to, I was in this building. Then I heard you shouting, so I came upstairs... Speaking of, where are we, anyway? This isn't the Jailhouse, is it?"

"Unfortunately, it still is. It's just a separate section of the annex. We have to find the last piece of the keycard and get out of here."

"Oh, I think I found that," Mika said, her voice bursting with excitement. "We can open the front door with this, right? Isn't this it?"

She retrieved a plastic fragment from her breast pocket and handed it to Takuro.

"Seriously?" His heart leaped at this unexpected turn of fortune. "Mika, where did you get this?"

"I don't know. I just had it when I woke up."

"Hey, Hiroshi, do you see now? Would the monster just hand over the card like that?"

"I'm afraid you're the one who doesn't see, Takuro," Hiroshi answered solemnly, shaking his head. "Judging from its shape, that's the piece the monster ran off with. What's in front of you isn't Mika. It's the monster that attacked you in the entrance hall."

Mika's... a monster? That can't be.

"Seriously, what are you two talking about?" Mika arched her eyebrows in suspicion. "What do you mean... I'm a monster?"

There was true fear on her face. It was too hard to see her as an enemy like this. Understanding Takuro's misgivings, Hiroshi continued.

"Takuro, you must not be swayed. The girl you see before you is simply acting based on Mika's memories. She herself believes she's the real Mika."

"If she's got her memories, then doesn't that make her the real thing?" Takuro said angrily. "I can't betray her again. If her heart is still in there, then there has to be a way to save her."

Takuro defiantly turned away from Hiroshi and grabbed Mika's arm.

"We only need one more piece of the card to open the front door. Mika, come with us."

However, she quickly untwisted herself from his grip.

"...Mika?"

"No." Mika shook her head. "Hiroshi is probably right."

"Huh?"

"Something feels weird. I'm super hungry. When I look at the blood flowing from your arm, my mind gets even cloudier. I feel like I'm losing myself..."

"You're not. You're still you."

"Takuro, you're shivering. I can see your breath and everything. It must be really cold here. But I don't feel it at all. I even gave you my coat. Honestly, I'm so hot that I can't stand it. It's like there's a fire in my guts..."

She stepped away from Takuro and shook her head over and over.

"I'm sorry, Takuro, but this is goodbye. I'm happy you tried to protect me. Thank you," she said before fleeing down the stairs.

3

Mika always had a lonely look on her face. Even when she was fooling around with her classmates or laughing at a TV show, there was a loneliness deep in her eyes. Now Takuro understood. He'd come to have special feelings for her because he sensed the same loneliness that he felt in her. He thought that if they were together, he might be able to fill the giant hole in his heart.

"Hey, wait!"

He reached out for her, but it was too late.

"Takuro, no!"

Ignoring Hiroshi's cry, he chased after her.

Don't run away, Mika. We have to be together.

Mika ran down the stairs, proceeding further into the building. She pushed open the double doors to the left.

"Mika, no!"

She went inside without turning around, but Takuro wasn't about to give up there. Placing his hand on the unique, over-the-top golden door, Takuro pushed it open and followed her in.

"Where is this...?"

He gulped at the sight before him. Rows of ancient wooden benches lined up before what looked like an altar. Was it a chapel? The mood of the room was distinctly different from the hallway. He looked up and saw a domed ceiling high overhead. It seemed the building was shaped like an upside-down U, with the chapel at the center.

Returning his gaze to the front of the room, he spotted a white statue of a goddess on top of the altar. But the thing at her feet didn't look the least bit holy. Covered in creepy feathers, thin arms sprouted from its giant eyes—it was the same eyeball monster he'd seen picture after picture of since coming here.

He could hear Mika sobbing nearby. He found her curled up in the shadow of one of the pews, shivering like a child who'd lost their mother. He kneeled down, softly hugging her from behind. The warmth he felt from her settled his heart.

"Why did you come?" she asked, still hiding her face.

"I want to save you from this nightmare."

He wasn't lying.

"It's too late. I'm already dead."

"You're not dead. You're right here, aren't you?"

"No. I'm not me."

"Yes, you are. You're clearly you. You have that same sadness in your eyes even when you smile—that's the Mika I know so well."

"Takuro..." Her back still turned to him, great tears began to fall from her eyes.

Takuro heard the heavy doors to the room open again. Hiroshi must have come after him.

"Hiroshi, don't bother. No matter what you say, I won't abandon Mika—" Takuro began to say as he stood up and turned around.

But towering over him was the giant monster. Its sharp fangs instantly pierced his chest. He felt like he could hear Mika screaming from somewhere far away.

No. I can't die yet. I have to save Mika...

"Noooooooooo!"

Mika's face swelled horribly as she wailed.

"I'm sorry... Mika..." he whispered as he watched her transform into the monster. "I... betrayed you again..."

He couldn't tell if she heard him or not. His vision was rapidly fading. And just like that, his consciousness sank into a deep, dark abyss.



Chapter 12

ONI NI KANABOU

1.) (From the saying "to give an overwhelmingly powerful ogre
an iron club") To make something strong even stronger



By the purple fluorescent light in the room, Hiroshi worked to undo the bedroom doorknob. First, he carefully inserted the blade of the box cutter, still covered in the monster's fluids, into the slot on one of the screws. The cold numbed his fingers, making it difficult to move them. But every time his mind flashed back to Takuro, the more panicked he became.

For a moment, he'd thought about going down the stairs after him, but if a monster did appear, then the lithe and agile Takuro would stand a better chance of escaping on his own. Hiroshi would just be a hindrance to him now. So instead, he decided to throw himself completely into something that would be useful.

A few screws later, he was finally able to pry off the knob. He then took it straight over to the door hidden behind the wallpaper. He installed it, and he patted his chest to calm himself before slowly turning it.

Before him opened up to a room much like the others, with only a bed and a wardrobe. But he knew that couldn't be all. There had to be a reason this room was hidden. Hiroshi headed straight for the wardrobe and pulled on the doors.

"It seems I was correct."

His chest felt a little lighter. Inside the wardrobe lay a fragment of the keycard. He picked it up and examined its shape. This was definitely the piece Takeshi had run off with. The monster must have feared them getting ahold of it and come to hide it here.

The fact that it had enough presence of mind to do that shocked Hiroshi, but in the end, it was just a savage creature that only thought about eating humans. It could never stand up to true human knowledge.

Moreover, they had all the pieces now. They could finally open the front door. A ray of hope was now shining on what had seemed like a dark and grim future for them. Hiroshi could feel energy filling his tired body. He had to laugh at himself. The human body was so simple. This was but one state of being of a seemingly ever-changing form.

Shaking off an image of Mika's face that rose up in the back of his mind for a second, Hiroshi stood up straight. He only had two pieces of the keycard on him. Takuro had the last one. They needed to rendezvous as soon as possible. But the moment Hiroshi turned around to head for the door, he heard a sound from the adjoining room. Someone had entered.

Grrt... Grrt...

He could then hear a scratching sound like something being dragged across the floor. Someone was walking around in there. But it couldn't be Takuro. Surely he would have come straight for the room Hiroshi was in.

Perhaps it is the monster. I should observe the situation before acting.

Hiroshi, careful as he could be not to make a sound, hid himself in the wardrobe. He closed the doors from the inside and held his breath. Then he heard the door to the room open. The hair standing up on the back of his neck told him something had come in.

Grrt... Grrt...

That strange sound traveled all across the room.

What is it doing?

Hiroshi tried to sneak a peek through the tiny gap between the wardrobe doors, but couldn't see anyone. Yet the sound never stopped. Something other than the monster was patrolling the room. Something possibly even more dangerous than that. The scent of danger in his nose, Hiroshi held his breath and did his best to stay quiet.

How long have I been here?

Suddenly, the room shook. The sound of something heavy breaking echoed through the air. Then a stout blow battered the wardrobe. Hiroshi had no idea what was going on. He couldn't see anyone that could have done it through the gap in the doors. And yet... there was certainly something out there.

Then the sounds ceased as suddenly as they had begun. He heard the door to the room open again, and with that, the dark presence that had been occupying the room was gone. Silence returned. Yet still, Hiroshi continued to hold his breath inside the closet. His heart was racing a thousand beats per second. Eventually, judging that the coast was clear, he opened the doors.

"...!"

Hiroshi was at a loss for words at the strange sight he beheld. The walls, floor, and ceilings—every inch of the room was scribbled over with blue magic marker. It was the same childlike graffiti he'd seen in the adjacent room, but this was off the rails. He could only sense a manic craziness from it.

"Help me..." He heard a voice croak painfully. *"Please help me..."*

Hiroshi fled from the room and rushed down the stairs as fast as he could. Fanged monsters had attacked him. He'd seen the mangled corpses of his classmates. Unimaginable phenomena were happening one after the other, the tragedies only increasing as time wore on. And yet what he feared most was the fact that he was losing his mind.

Hiroshi moved through the first-floor hallway, painting after painting of the eyeball monster sliding through his peripheral vision. Looking further down the hall, he spotted a giant door with intricate engravings on it. Making sure the monster wasn't in the vicinity, he approached it carefully.

The art on the door was of the same bat-winged giant eyeball creature from the paintings. The same unreadable worm-like writing he'd witnessed in the study accompanied it. But what he'd thought was one large door at first was actually a set of double doors, clearly different from anything else he'd come across. Something special had to be on the other side.

What could it be?

He nervously placed his hand on one of the doors. Just then...

Skree!

A repulsive cry filled his ears as a ball tumbled down the stairs. No, it was no ball. It stopped at the bottom of the staircase and turned, looking right at Hiroshi. It rubbed the right side of its face over and over, as if its crushed right eye was painning it.

The small monster let out another high-pitched scream and half leaped, half charged at Hiroshi. He instinctively leaned back and to the side. The monster was so fast that it was all he had time to do. The monster flew past the tip of his nose and landed lightly right in front of the wall at the end of the hall. Instantly, it turned back around. There was less than a meter between them. The next time it jumped, Hiroshi wouldn't even have time to dodge.

What do I do?

His mind was racing, but he couldn't think of anything in his panic.

The monster leaped once more into the air. Reflexively, Hiroshi backed up. Suddenly, the floor beneath him gave way. He tried to grab on to anything he could, but his palms simply swiped at empty air. Down into the darkness he fell.

Predicting a hard landing against the unforgiving floor, Hiroshi moved to protect his head. But surprisingly enough, the landing was softer than expected. A burst of white powder shot up into the air. Some of it got sucked into his nose as he inhaled, making him cough uncontrollably. But he recognized the smell—wheat flour. His surroundings were dark, making it difficult to discern just where he was. But based on the sensation below his back, he could at least tell that he'd fallen atop a jute bag full of flour.

Skree!

A high-pitched squeal echoed from above. Hiroshi looked up to see the monster peering at him through the hole he'd opened up. But

watch was all it did. It refused to come after him. It almost seemed afraid to descend floors.

But Hiroshi couldn't afford to relax. There was no telling when it might have a change of heart. Hiroshi stood up and took the flashlight out from his pocket. He shone it about, looking for an escape route.

The cramped room was filled with bags of flour and many wooden boxes stacked on top of each other. Using brute force to break open the crates, he checked them for anything useful. It seemed he'd broken something inside one of them. A smell like a distinct mix of alcohol and oil wafted up. Had this once been the mansion's storehouse?

He continued breaking open crates until he stumbled across a wooden door. Turning the knob, he burst out of the room. He was a little too eager in his escape, however, and stumbled forward a few steps. It was cold. Very cold. The moment he breathed in, he could feel the inside of his nose freezing over. It sent a chill through his entire body. It was like he was inside a freezer. Shivering, Hiroshi looked around.

The floor and walls were gray concrete. A single naked bulb hung from the ceiling casting, as he'd come to expect by now, purple light over the room. A crumbling passageway continued further in. Iron bars were affixed to either side of it.

What is this?

He could hear a creepy growling from somewhere. And it wasn't just the wind. He could sense a deep hatred to it.

Slowly walking forward, he peered through the bars. On the other side were many different rooms separated by concrete walls. No, not rooms. They were cells. Hiroshi peered into them, but could make out no prisoners. Yet the unsettling growling continued.

What on earth was this place created for? Was it always here? Is it a part of Shun's game? Or did someone else entirely construct this? Perhaps this is the true reason the mansion is called the Jailhouse...

The more he investigated the mansion, the greater its mysteries seemed to grow. The mansion proper they'd first set foot in seemed as though it had been lovingly constructed by an eccentric rich owner who had a taste for European flair—that was all. But after making it through the underground passage and arriving in the annex, it was clear the residents were a little more than just eccentric. The countless paintings of monsters lining the walls. The purple lighting. The freezing temperature. And this underground jail...

Based on accounts he'd heard from Shun and Takuro, Hiroshi knew there was a strange connection between Shun's escape game and the real world. The discrepancies between the Jailhouse's layout and the game's map could only mean one thing: someone who knew about both had rewritten the code. The culprits were most likely the

monsters haunting these very halls. Thanks to the web-enabled tablet, they were able to gain knowledge about various things. This was purely speculation, but the other side of the underground path—this newly created part of the annex—seemed to be much more conducive to the monsters' habitation.

Of course, Hiroshi didn't really think that the monsters had gained the knowledge to perform specialized programming. But Shun did push out new updates for the game every once in a while. Segments of past data and unused maps likely still existed within the game. The monsters could have potentially stitched together pre-existing elements like that to create a new Jailhouse.

Just... what were they? In the end, all the lingering mysteries came back to that one question. They weren't simply carnivorous beasts. The monsters had near-human levels of knowledge.

How long have they been here? Where did they come from? And what is their goal?

Hiroshi passed by each cell, eventually arriving at the end of the hall. Before him stood a concrete wall. He could go no further. He touched the wall just to be sure, but as he suspected, there was no hidden door here.

Slowly, he turned to his left. The last room there was made of glass. Inside it sat a small desk and a single pipe chair. If this basement had been created to observe someone, this seemed like the ideal place to keep watch on a subject.

Sliding the door to the side, Hiroshi set foot in the room. His hand immediately shot up to cover his nose in response to the raw stench swamping him. The unceasing, echoing growl grew much louder.

Hiroshi looked to the back wall of the room. There was a sturdy-looking door stained with brown spots. The growl seemed to be coming from the other side. Taking a deep breath of the stale, filthy air in the room, he slowly tried the knob.

Don't open it! Hiroshi's subconsciousness warned him. *You'll regret it if you do.*

Warning bells were going off in his head left and right. Perhaps after all the trials he'd been through in the mansion, his body had learned to anticipate danger.

It's not too late. Turn back now.

However, he willfully disobeyed all of those warnings. He just couldn't resist his mounting curiosity. Steeling himself, he opened the door.

"Oh..."

Something other than a scream or a sigh slipped from the depths of his throat. Before him was a giant cell, larger than any of the ones he'd seen so far. All at once, the creatures wriggling behind its bars

turned to him.

A complicated mixture of dread and delight filled him. He couldn't stop shaking. Tens, hundreds of the strange creatures were trapped inside. And they weren't limited to the types of monsters that had attacked so far, either. One had octopus-like tentacles; another wriggled its whole body like a snake. There were soft-bodied creatures in some kind of slime-like state; there immovable objects that looked like stones until you noticed the hundreds of eyes covering them... Each and every creature was glaring right at him.

That wasn't all they had in common, either. Every last one of them shared the same features: slimy, shining blue skin and sharp fangs. And upon seeing Hiroshi, they all began to stir and make a fuss as if they were demanding food. One with a relatively humanoid form grabbed the iron bars of the cell. Though it had the general shape of a human, it only had one eye on its face and long fangs ripping through its cheeks.

The one-eyed monster began violently shaking the bars. It let out a high-pitched screech, as if to try and scare him. Taking that as a signal, the other creatures in the cell clamored to the bars as well. They all began shaking them, too, glaring at Hiroshi as they did. The whole room shook like crazy. Pieces of concrete crumbled loose from the ceiling overhead. Hiroshi could see the bars beginning to warp.

Not good.

It was only a matter of time before the cell gave way. Hiroshi turned his back on the monsters, fully intending to flee this bizarre prison. But the door wouldn't open. Somehow, it had become locked. No matter how hard he tried to turn it, the knob wouldn't budge. All the blood in his body ran cold. Things had gone from bad to worse, and he could no longer maintain his composure.

What do I do?

He frantically looked around, desperate for a way to get out, but he was too panicked to think of anything. The loud cries of the monsters then suddenly stopped. Curious, Hiroshi turned around to see why, and was aghast at what he saw. The bars to the cell were bowed wide. Countless monsters were pushing their way through the opening.

Run!

His subconsciousness was screaming at him.

But where? Even if I wanted to, there's nowhere to go.

Hiroshi quickly found himself up against a wall.

Don't give up, don't give up, don't give up... This isn't reality. Think of it as a game. If it's a game, there has to be an escape route somewhere.

Hiroshi searched along the wall in hopes of finding a hidden door like on the second floor. But then suddenly, the wall next to the door

exploded with a roar. Clouds of white dust blotted out his vision. Coughing as he waved them away, he saw the giant figure looking down at him.

A gasp of despair slipped Hiroshi's lips.

It was the blue giant that had attacked him so many times that had broken through the wall. And this time, it was holding an iron pipe in one hand. Truly, he had gone from the frying pan straight into the fire. There was just no conceivable way for Hiroshi to win.

Takuro, Mika, Takeshi... I am terribly sorry, but this is as far as I go.

He could envision the words "game over" in the back of his mind. The monster's eyes immediately locked on to him, and the beast let out a low growl. There was also the pack of monsters closing in behind him. Hiroshi could run no more.

The slime-like monster took the lead and attacked first. Behind it, countless other monsters followed. There was simply no escape. Hiroshi resigned himself and closed his eyes.

With a sound like the popping of a balloon, the air around him rumbled. A sticky substance splattered on his cheek... but he felt no pain.

Am I saved?

He opened his eyes and looked down to see a monster spasming and frothing at the mouth on the floor at his feet. Incited by the loss of its brethren, another monster attacked in a rage. But in the blink of an eye, it was knocked backward into the air.

The giant monster that had broken down the wall had stepped forward and was standing there post-swing. Hiroshi didn't know what was happening. Did the monsters have some sort of falling out? It didn't matter. Now was his chance.

Hiroshi darted through the hole the giant had created, passed through the observation room, and burst out into the dark passageway. But the giant had followed—it was right behind him. It closed the sliding door behind it, and instead of attacking Hiroshi, stood the pipe up against it to bolt it shut. The creatures following it assaulted the door, but they were now unable to open it. They smushed up against the glass, creating a horrifying wall of hungry eyes.

The giant monster then moved in front of Hiroshi and stopped. Its unbalanced eyes swiveled around in its head, but that was it. Still extremely confused, Hiroshi watched as the monster began to shrink before him. Its skin quickly changed color as the monster transformed into something more familiar.

"What're you just standing there for? Hurry up and run, brainiac," he said, sweeping his bleach-blond hair up with his fingers in a display of his usual attitude.

What is the soul, he wondered.

Takeshi knew that he had died at the hands of the monster. It had sucked the meat from his bones until there was nothing left of him. But his mind still existed here somehow. Hiroshi had theorized that the monster could copy the consciousness of those it ingested. Which meant that if he was that copy, then his memories should be from before he died.

I only lost my body, but my mind still exists. So is this what they call the soul?

Takeshi had always been self-conscious of his small frame. He had neither strength nor courage. If he hadn't done anything, people would have looked down on him his entire life. That was why he curried favor with Takuro—to protect himself.

He was a sheep in wolf's clothing. That's what everyone called him. He knew it all too well. But what was so wrong with that? It was better than being torn apart by the wolves. Some people called him a liar. They just didn't understand.

I'm not a liar. I'm a strategist.

That's what he'd always thought, and that hadn't changed even now. If he hadn't clung to Takuro's heels, he very well may have ended up in Naoki's position. But nevertheless... that had come at a price.

Naoki had once visited Manpuku last summer. This was before he'd become the target of Takuro's bullying. On Takeshi's recommendation, he ordered the special fried rice and happily chowed down on it. Takeshi could still remember him saying how delicious it was over and over, his cheeks stuffed with rice. It was clear he wasn't just being polite. Naoki wasn't one for flattery, and even if he was, there was no need to go out of his way to give the same compliment three times.

"I'll be back," Naoki had said with a burp as he'd paid the bill.

"Next time, I'll let you taste *my* fried rice," Takeshi had said proudly.

"Huh? You're gonna cook?"

"I saw that look of disgust just now! Don't underestimate me, idiot. I can make fried rice way better than my dad."

That comment had earned Takeshi a scolding and a smack on the back of the head from his father, which elicited a chuckle from Naoki.

"All right. Next time, then. I'll look forward to it."

That might have been the last time Takeshi saw Naoki smile. And

in the end, he never did come back to the restaurant.

Even after seeing all the damage Takuro had inflicted on him, Takeshi couldn't offer a single word of condolence. If he made an enemy of Takuro, he'd be next on the list. So he lied to himself and laughed along with Takuro at Naoki's pain. What else could he do?

He'd always hoped to apologize to Naoki one day. But he never got up the courage to do it. And while he floundered in his hesitation and cowardice, Naoki died. It wasn't just Naoki, though. Takeshi had a lot of people he needed to apologize to. Just how many sneaky lies had he told? How many problems had he caused just because he was a huge coward? But it was too late. He was dead now. He couldn't apologize to anyone. The regret became a tidal wave, threatening to engulf him.

He'd always run from difficulty. And he'd always believed that it was the right thing to do. Of course, running away isn't inherently a bad thing. It's always an option. But it's a means to an end. It should never be the goal.

I don't want to have lived my whole life running away.

His body might be gone, but Takeshi's soul still existed. It wouldn't last for long, though. Just as his flesh and bones had dissolved inside the monster's stomach, his consciousness would be consumed eventually. There was something he had to do before then: atone for the various evils he'd committed in life. No one needed to suffer anymore because he hadn't acted.

Slipping back through the hole in the wall, Takeshi followed Hiroshi. It was pure instinct that told him it was Hiroshi. Or perhaps it was a special power belonging to the monster.

That's right, I'm not a shrimp now! I'm super strong! I can stand up and be brave in the face of danger!

As his transformation into the monster neared completion, Takeshi's consciousness was fading fast. He could barely control his body. But the sight of Hiroshi's plight stoked his emotions.

Are you going to run away again?

Takeshi fought desperately against the monster's quickly encroaching instincts.

If I don't fight now, Hiroshi will die! Don't run! Stand strong! I'm not a coward!

"Ugh, don't just stand there. Come here."

Hiroshi was standing there gobsmacked. Takeshi grabbed him by the hand and took off running. Doing his best to suppress the monster inside him threatening to take over at any moment, Takeshi punched the wall on the other side of the warehouse. The concrete crumbled and light shone in from the other side.

"Hurry. There's a staircase up ahead."

“How do you know that?”

Takeshi nearly burst out laughing when he saw the confused look on Hiroshi’s face. It made him a little happy to know that even the smartest kid in class could look so stupid.

“You can’t even understand that much? Some egghead you are. I’m one of the mansion monsters,” he replied, almost bragging.

“Do you mean that you’ve synchronized with the monster’s consciousness?”

“I don’t know the gory details. You’re the smart one. Once you’re safely out of here, you can spend all the time in the world theorizing about it.”

The sound of breaking glass echoed in the darkness behind them. A cloud of dust flooded from the dim passageway as monsters began surging in. Their last line of defense hadn’t held for long, it seemed.

“Quit dawdling, or they’ll catch you! Hurry!” Takeshi shouted as he shoved Hiroshi through the broken wall.

“Takeshi, if you know everything about the monsters, then, please, tell me one thing,” Hiroshi said, poking his head back from the other side of the wall. “What are they?”

“I don’t know that much. Look, do you want to die? Get going!”

He shot out his right arm and sent Hiroshi flying.

I lied again... But this time, I should be forgiven.

Where had the monsters come from? What was their goal? If Takeshi told him the truth, Hiroshi most likely would have lost his mind.

Repelling a slime-bodied monster that tried to chase after Hiroshi, Takeshi shouted at the top of his lungs, “Oh, no you don’t! You’ll have to get through me first!”

The look in the monsters’ eyes changed. They seemed to be filled with intense anger. They were incomplete beings that had been trapped underground their whole lives—surely their brains were undeveloped. A taunt should easily draw their attention.

“Over here, idiots!” Takeshi shouted, dashing in the opposite direction he’d sent Hiroshi.

As he expected, the monsters gave chase. The white powder that had settled on the floor was kicked up into the air once more. A familiar scent stung the insides of Takeshi’s nose. For some reason, tears welled up in his eyes.

This... smells like the restaurant.

The image of his dad wielding a wok with one hand rose up in the back of his mind. And there was his mom, busily running about the restaurant.

“Hey, Takeshi! How about you come down here and help instead of watching that confounded TV all day?”

He could swear he heard his mother's voice.

"Heh heh," he chuckled, sniffing a bit.

Picking up a bottle of oil from the floor, Takeshi climbed atop a stack of wooden crates.

"Come on, idiots! I'm right here!" he shouted loudly as he began dousing the teeming mob of monsters with the oil.

He watched the ensuing uproar from above as he pulled out the lighter from his pocket. Hands shaking, he flicked it to life.

"Huh? That's weird," he muttered to himself and laughed. "I can't stop shaking. Takuro's gonna call me a coward again."

Takeshi paused for the briefest moment to wipe away his tears.

"I'm still scared of dying. I'm still scared even though I'm already dead. I'm still scared even though I'm strong now. But... I want this to be the end. I want to save them."

Opening his hand, he let the lighter fall down below into the mass of monsters. Flame instantly engulfed the room. It shot up here and there, swallowing monsters one after the other. They thrashed about, squealing and screaming their last as the flames consumed them. Takeshi's jacket too caught fire from the embers exploding into the air.

"Sorry, mom. I don't think I'll be able to help with the restaurant anymore," he whispered as he wiped his tears and held his head high, his mouth resolutely drawn in a tight line.



Chapter 13

LEVEL UP

When Hiroshi hit the top of the stairs, a giant statue of a goddess stood before him. Including the altar it was enshrined in, it was over five meters tall. Hiroshi looked above it and saw a dome-shaped ceiling stretching out overhead. It was like he was in a replica of the Roman Pantheon.

The pounding of the rain was growing louder. If he could hear it this well, that had to mean there was only a single wall separating him from the monsterless, peaceful world outside. He wanted to leave immediately, but he'd have to reunite with Takuro and make his way back to the main building first.

At the goddess's feet lay the eyeball monster, wings spread. It looked like it was being punished, or perhaps pleading for help. Either way, it made for a very disturbing impression.

Hiroshi stepped away from it and looked around the rest of the room. It was a lot like the chapel his grandfather had taken him to as a child. Did that mean someone revered the goddess up on the altar? He glanced up at the statue again. There was an innocent look in the goddess's eyes. Surely it wasn't the monsters that worshiped her.

Passing between the rows of benches lined up facing the altar, Hiroshi headed for the double doors in the back of the room. About halfway there, a piece of plastic on the floor caught his eye. He picked it up and studied it. It was the keycard fragment Mika had given them. It had to be. It fit perfectly with the two pieces Hiroshi already had.

And with that, he had the completed keycard in his possession. He breathed a sigh of relief, but it was brief. He suddenly felt an alarming presence behind him. He quickly turned around. There stood Takuro.

"Hey. You're safe, huh?" he said with a smile.

"Takuro, I have all of the keycard fragments now. Let us return to the entrance hall immediately."

"No, that'd be a waste of time. Do you know why I tossed that piece after finally getting it back from the monster?" Takuro stood there with his hands in his pockets, rolling his shoulders and grinning widely.

"...Why is that?" Hiroshi asked, unsure.

"Because you can't open the front door with it," he spat in reply.

"I don't follow."

"Don't you remember what you said? The monster learned all kinds of stuff from the tablet and evolved. Of course it noticed the keycard taped to the back. Investigating Shun's game would have revealed that it opened the front door, too. So the monster ate it on

the spot.”

“Then this card...”

“It’s something my father had with him. He went all kinds of places for work. It’s probably the key to the company garage.”

“That can’t be...”

“We all thought it was the right key because Shun reacted to it. But if you think for a second, it wasn’t like he got a good look at it for himself. He just assumed it was the same one because it was blue.”

“...”

“The monster knew that it wasn’t the real key, though. It was just playing with us.”

“I see... So that’s how it is. This is extremely unfortunate.”

Hiroshi placed the key in his pocket and took out the box cutter, pointing it at Takuro.

“Hiroshi? What the hell are you doing?” Takuro asked, his expression tense.

“Please do not get any closer.”

“What? You scared of me?” Takuro laughed and shrugged. “You don’t think I’m a monster too now, do you?”

“Then how did you know the card was a fake?”

“I...” He tried to answer, but couldn’t. “I wonder. I don’t really know.”

“The monster’s memories are mixing with yours from before your death.”

“Don’t be stupid. I’m not a monster. Here, look. I’m still injured to prove it.”

Still smiling, Takuro stuck out his right arm. And indeed, the painful-looking teeth marks in his upper arm remained. So did the gauze on his cheek.

“If I were really the monster or whatever, I wouldn’t be hurt like this, right?”

Hiroshi shook his head. “You must have bitten yourself to recreate the injury. I won’t be fooled by such simple deception.”

“They’re not that smart, man.”

“Perhaps they weren’t before. But eating humans has made them smarter.”

“You’re so stubborn. I’m not a freakin’ monster. You really don’t believe me? After all the crap we’ve been through together?”

“Then take off the gauze. You may have been smart enough to fake the arm injury, but perhaps you overlooked the one on your face because you never had the opportunity to observe it directly.”

“All right, fine. I’ll show you.”

He tore off the gauze, but, just as Hiroshi had suspected, there was no injury.

“...What?” Takuro asked quietly, touching his cheek with a look of shock on his face.

“I do not doubt that you thought you were telling the truth. You genuinely believe you’re human, but that’s false. You are a monster with Takuro’s memories.”

“How did you know?”

“Have you heard of mydriasis?”

Takuro cocked his head. Standing his ground, Hiroshi explained.

“Mydriasis is the excessive dilation of the pupil. When I turned the lighter on Takeshi in the room with the fireplace, I thought it was strange, but I became sure of it after running into Mika on the second floor of this building. Even with the flashlight shining in her eyes, her pupils remained dilated. They didn’t contract at all.”

“...”

“And the same goes for you. I am sure it is hard to tell without a mirror, but your irises are pitch black right now. All of the monsters I saw underground were the same way, too. And so I’m forced to conclude you’re one of them. Do you understand?”

Covering the eyes took away the precious sense of sight. Even full-body costumes had openings for the eyes so that whoever was inside could see and move freely. This was the same principle.

“You may be able to change everything else at will, but not the eyes.”

“I should have expected as much from you...” Takuro chuckled. “I just can’t beat you.”

With those words, all emotion drained from Takuro’s face.

“...Why?” He asked in an uncharacteristically low and hoarse voice. “Tell me why.”

2

Mika appeared from the shadow of the altar. She was unharmed, the same as Takuro. She drew closer, one slow step at a time. Her eyes too were pitch black. In her arms she held a small monster. It was the blocky creature with rabbit-like eyes that had bitten Hiroshi’s calf. It was sound asleep in her embrace.

“Takuro...”

She touched his shoulder and whispered something. Takuro patted her hand and nodded. Then he turned back to Hiroshi.

“The basement is on fire. Apparently all of the other monsters have been wiped out.” He continued, his voice devoid of feeling.

“Why did you do this? Who asked you to? We never caused you any trouble...”

Before he could quite finish, Takuro transformed into the monster. And he went straight for Hiroshi.

Hiroshi turned on his heels to flee when an ear-splitting boom roared through the room. He was thrown backward violently enough to slam him into the wall and knock the wind out of him. He looked around to try and figure out what happened. There was a great hole in the floor. Flames were shooting up from below. He recalled the massive stores of flour kept in the basement. If enough of it had gotten kicked up and there was a fire, it must have created a dust explosion.

The chapel was now in shambles. The benches were blown to pieces, and the goddess statue was leaning diagonally. A section of the ceiling was even caved in, letting in a torrent of the pouring rain. Takuro and Mika had been blown back by the explosion, too. They were both groaning in pain as the rain drenched them. The small monster was licking Mika's cheek. It seemed to have taken a liking to her. Takuro was back to his human form, as well, perhaps an effect of the impact.

Suddenly, their surroundings grew brighter. The rain clouds had parted enough for the face of the full moon to be seen overhead. Bluish-white light now poured in through the ceiling along with the rain. Fully awash in the moonlight, Takuro looked unsettled for a moment. Then he began laughing loudly.

"The light doesn't bother me. I feel nothing. I see... By ingesting a human, I've gained a body that is resistant to ultraviolet light."

Heavy rain poured down on him as he smiled victoriously. His voice was growing deeper and less human by the second.

"We have finally achieved bodies capable of adapting to this world. We no longer need to hide in such a place. Surely if we explore the world, we will find others like ourselves. We are no longer threatened with extinction. No—our time has finally come."

As it laughed, Hiroshi slipped past and took a firm hold of the goddess statue. It was a mere two meters from the tallest part of the altar enshrining the statue to the hole in the ceiling. It wasn't an impossible distance.

Realizing Hiroshi's intent to escape, Takuro's form changed horribly. Within moments, Mika followed suit. They came after Hiroshi as he attempted to scale the statue. But he couldn't afford to be caught. Hiroshi desperately climbed higher.

One of the monsters jumped up onto the altar. Its legs were thicker and shoulders broader than the other. This one was most likely Takuro. The one that had ingested Mika was watching from below with the smaller monster.

But Hiroshi was in bad shape. His stamina was wearing thin. His hands, wet from the rain, couldn't keep a proper grip on the statue. He

needed to hurry, or the monster would catch him. But the more he panicked, the more he lost control over his own body.

“Ah!”

His right hand reached out for the goddess’s breast, but only grabbed empty air. He instantly lost his balance. His left leg, which he’d been using to valiantly hold himself in place, slipped in the rainwater, and he was immediately sent plummeting towards the floor. He landed straight in the monster’s waiting arms. It was the worst possible situation. Hiroshi prepared himself for death, but the monster merely stared at him. It quickly shrunk, transforming back into Takuro.

“Be careful, Hiroshi. You’d be dead right now if I hadn’t caught you,” Takuro said jokingly.

“...Why?”

Why did you save me? You’re a monster.

“The dumb monsters are afraid of anyone crazy enough to try climbing their sacred goddess, so now’s your chance. Hurry up and go!” he shouted, sounding much more like Takuro than the monster.

“Takuro, come with me!” Hiroshi shouted back. “I met Takeshi in the basement. I suspect he retained his ego just like you.”

“I heard from Mika. He killed all the monsters, right? That took some balls. He wasn’t so bad after all.”

“Once we escape, we can search for a way for you to remain in your human form, or—”

“No,” he said, cutting Hiroshi off. “I’m happy you’d invite a monster like me along, but I gotta turn you down.”

“What?”

“This one’s afraid of heights. She just likes to put up a strong front,” Takuro said, nodding toward the other monster. “I can’t leave Mika alone. She gets really lonely, even though she’s always acting tough. Isn’t that hilarious?”

Another explosion erupted from below. Pillars of fire now shot up from all around. The rising clouds of dust and smoke that came with them concealed Takuro from sight.

“Takuro!” Hiroshi called.

“Now hurry! It was fun playing on the same team, Hiroshi!”

There was no time to hesitate. He had to make it out alive. Resolute, Hiroshi grabbed on to the statue again. He could see the hazy moonlight up above. That would be his goal.

Blood oozed from his palms. He could hardly breathe. His vision dimmed, and he nearly fainted over and over again. But everything below was now completely engulfed in flames. If he fell again, it would be certain death. Perhaps it would be easier to just let go... But Hiroshi was determined to survive, for Mika, for Takeshi, for Takuro.

Finally standing atop the altar, Hiroshi sucked in a lungful of fresh air from the outside and leaped up toward the full moon. Grabbing the lip of the hole in the ceiling, he pulled himself out of the mansion. Now he just had to scale a pillar down.

The giant statue slowly crumbled below, sinking into the sea of flames as if in acknowledgment of his escape.



By the time Shun and Anna were released from police custody, the full moon was gone. It had sunk below the horizon, and now the eastern sky was beginning to lighten. Following their parents, they left the moldy-smelling station. Anna, perhaps blinded by the rising sun, timidly hid behind Shun's back.

The detectives that had questioned them wouldn't say anything about the Jailhouse investigation. Not even a word about whether their friends had been found or if they were all right. Even Shun, who was bad at taking a hint, had picked up on the fact that things must not be going well. He'd discreetly borrowed his mom's smartphone and had tried to call the Jailhouse tablet, but as expected, there was no response from Hiroshi or the others.

Anna hadn't said a thing since they left the interview room. Neither had Shun. If he opened his mouth, he knew the conversation would inevitably turn to the Jailhouse whether he liked it or not. He feared that the moment he said it out loud, what he feared most would become reality. And because of that, he hadn't been able to find the courage to say anything to Anna.

At the parking lot, their parents bade each other farewell and left Shun and Anna to do the same as they headed toward their respective cars.

"See you," Shun said.

He turned to look at Anna and waved a little with his right hand. That was the most he could manage right now.

"...Yeah..."

Anna was still looking down, refusing to meet his gaze. She'd been like this ever since the interviews. But it wasn't that surprising. The trauma of being attacked by a monster wasn't something that she would get over quickly.

After that, Shun turned and jogged over to his mother, who was waiting by the car for him. That was when a familiar face approached. It was the stern-faced police officer he'd first reported the situation to. The long shift must have really taken its toll—his scowling face was much more grim than it had seemed in the dark of night.

"Long night for you, too, kid? That's rough," he said, rubbing his brow and unshaven face. "Did you hear about the Jailhouse?"

"No..." Shun shook his head honestly.

His heart was racing. Would this be it? The moment he got the bad news? Preparing for the worst, Shun clenched both of his fists. But the officer's next words came as a surprise.

“Were your friends really trapped inside the Jailhouse?”

“...Huh?” Shun asked, not understanding.

“The tactical unit breached the building via the attic, but they only found the corpse of Smile’s president. They checked every room in the place, but couldn’t find anyone else.”

That couldn’t be. The monster swallowed even its victims’ bones and licked up every drop of spilled blood, so it was possible that they might never find any sign of the bodies. But where had the monster disappeared to?

“Did you investigate the annex?”

“The annex?”

“There should have been a small door opposite the entrance hall. If you go through the underground path there, you’ll reach another building—”

“No. There was a big hole in the wall, but that was it. Don’t go all kooky on me, kid. You checked the perimeter, too, didn’t you? You should know there was no annex.”

He was right. There was no annex on the property. He didn’t know how, but it was possible that the underground passage worked like a wormhole. Hiroshi and the others had headed for the annex in order to retrieve the keycard. But if the path between the annex and the mansion proper—the underground path—had been cut somehow, they might never be able to make it back even if they eluded the monster and survived. They’d been locked in the Jailhouse for over half a day now. They all had to be at their limits. If they were still alive, they needed to be rescued immediately. But Shun couldn’t see how that was possible now.

Just as he was sinking into the depths of despair, the first few notes of the third movement of *Sinfonia Tapkaara* reached his ears. Lifting his head, he grabbed his messenger bag. It was coming from his laptop.

“It can’t be...”

Normally the melody would be unsettling, but now it was like a hallelujah. Pulling out his laptop, he opened it with shaking hands. A window for the communications app was flashing. The caller ID read “Jailhouse PC.” He pressed the answer button, and the image of his classmate’s face appeared.

“Good morning, Shun.”

“Hiroshi!”

Shun could hardly see the screen through his tears. It had only been a few hours since their last call, and yet it felt like an eternity.

“Sorry. The tablet broke. But luckily, I found this box cutter and was able to splice a wire back together.” His face was dark and dirty, as if covered in soot, but his voice was strong and steady.

“So you escaped?” Shun asked.

He could see a lush line of coniferous trees in the background and the sun shining on the right half of Hiroshi’s face. It was clear he wasn’t in the Jailhouse.

“Yes, somehow. You must have been worried.”

Hiroshi rubbed his dirty nose and smiled. Seeing that made Shun’s chest burn hotter and hotter.

“Where are you now?”

“The hills behind school. I finally found an area with reception, so I thought I’d try calling. I’m glad I got through to you.”

“The hills? Why are you there?”

“After escaping the Jailhouse, I ran without thinking. I ran and ran, but the cypress forest was endless. Honestly, I thought I was lost. But when I stopped to take a break and study the insects, I realized I wasn’t very far from the school. Then I deduced which way to go based on the sun and the growth of the trees, and descended the hill.”

Shun was astonished. But that was Hiroshi for you.

“I’m so glad... You escaped even without the blue keycard.”

“Oh, you mean this?” Hiroshi said, holding it up to the camera. “The thing is...”

Hiroshi then revealed the earth-shattering truth, and it struck Shun dumb for a moment. He felt an inexplicable unease creep up on him.

“Is Hiroshi okay?” Anna excitedly called to him from behind.

The gloomy aura that hung over her earlier was now nowhere to be seen. Learning that Hiroshi was safe must have lifted a weight off her shoulders.

“Yeah. He’s in the hills behind school. Let’s go get him.”

Shun grabbed Anna by the hand and started to run, away from the adults.

“This key wasn’t for opening the front door to the Jailhouse.”

But everything Hiroshi had just told him rattled in the back of his mind.

“That is what the monster with Takuro’s memories told me... Yes, unfortunately, they were all eaten by monsters. Monsters that had the power to transform into the people they ate.”

It was all a little hard to swallow, but Hiroshi wasn’t the type to lie. Mulling it all over, something else came to mind—the events at the hospital the night before.

“...How nostalgic.”

Specifically, he recalled what Saya had said as she lay in bed smiling.

“It’s been so long since we last saw each other. I never thought they’d still be alive.”

It wasn't Naoki that had visited her before Shun and stabbed her. She wouldn't have been able to see him. Even on the off-chance she had powers like Anna, there was no reason for her to feel nostalgic about seeing him.

"They appeared so suddenly. They seemed oh-so troubled, so the master let them live in the mansion while we moved overseas."

Could it have been a monster that visited her? If what Hiroshi said was true...

"This key wasn't for opening the front door to the Jailhouse. Apparently it found and ate the real key before we got there."

"Oh..."

Shun stopped. He finally realized the source of the unease that came over him when Hiroshi first told him everything.





"WHAT'S THE
MATTER, SHUN?"



Shun slowly turned to face Anna as she caught up to him. If the keycard had already been destroyed by the time Anna was locked in the Jailhouse, then how had she gotten out? There was no other way to open the door. Either she had to use the key, or everyone inside the mansion had to die.

It can't be...

His knees began to shake horribly.

"Oh. Isn't that your mother, Shun?"

It had been pitch black outside the hospital. You could hardly see your own hand in front of your face. So how had Anna noticed Shun's mother so quickly? Could she have been, all along...

A flock of birds loitering on the edge of a nearby roof all took flight. A shiba inu passing by bared its fangs and growled. Shun stood there stunned, unable to take a step. He felt like he could hear a hoarse voice from somewhere.

"We have finally achieved bodies capable of adapting to this world. We no longer need to hide in such a place. Surely if we explore the world, we will find others like ourselves. We are no longer threatened with extinction. No—our time has finally come."

Anna was smiling.

Afterword

As I'm sure you're all aware, the live-action adaptation of *Ao Oni* is out now. I mentioned it in the afterword of the first volume, but I love horror movies. I wrote these books thinking about what I'd want to see in this kind of horror movie. So to see the story become a movie as I envisioned it thrills me. The CG monster is much more grotesque than in Mr. noprops's original game or in the illustrations Ms. Suzuragi does for the novels. And yet the more I watch, the cuter it becomes. It's strange. Grotesque cuteness—perhaps that is the true allure of *Ao Oni*. I just had to see those adorable round eyes one more time and ended up going to the theater five times. Don't tell anyone.

Anyway... This is already the third installment in the *Ao Oni* novels. As I foreshadowed in the last afterword, this volume was based on version 6.23. Greater perils than any they have seen in the previous volumes assail our heroes and heroines. If they became ———, what would humans do? As I considered this, all sorts of ideas flowed through my head. As a result, I was able to create a more suspenseful story than ever before. What's more, there's another exciting surprise in this volume. A certain popular character from the games makes an appearance. Any more would be a spoiler, so I can't say. If you have to know, just read the book.

With that said, I personally enjoyed writing the “Mutation” (I really like this subtitle) story much more than the previous volumes. I was writing as I watched the movie version, as well, so I'm sure I was filled with the most excitement I've ever been as I wrote it. My dreams are getting bigger, too. Now I'm hoping this volume also gets a live-action adaptation. Hopefully it's not just me, and all you readers enjoy it, as well.

Now, for those of you who have already read the volume, you may be wondering if there will be a fourth installment. If so, what version will it be based on? What about you-know-who? Can things even continue past this point? I'm sure you have all kinds of questions. I don't want to say goodbye to Hiroshi and Shun and the gang, either, so I do want to write a sequel.

And so, here's to hoping we meet a fourth time.

Kenji Kuroda

AO
UNI

MUTATION



I had so much fun drawing again for the third installment in the Ao Oni novelizations: "Mutation." Mr. Kuroda's writing makes Hiroshi and the gang seem more alive with every passing volume. Each one has a different direction and a variety of trials, which I really like. This time we got to see Takeshi and Takuro grow, and the intense build-up really got to me. I really enjoyed drawing Takeshi's believable expressions, overflowing with emotion. Those are my favorite. Thank you very much!

Personally, I found it hilarious that Blockman ended up as Mika's pet. Whenever I ran into it in the game, I was terrified of its aggressiveness, but as I was drawing it, I started to catch myself thinking it was kind of cute to look at.

Also, as we slowly get closer to the heart of the mystery, that scene with Shun and Anna at the end had me on the edge of my seat. I have to know what happens next!

As I was working on the illustrations for this volume, the live action movie came out. Seeing the monsters in 3D and moving around... I realized just how amazing it all is. It was a very fun movie with a lot of punch, so please go see it if you get the chance.



To noprops, the mad genius who gave birth to Ao Oni; Mr. Kenji Kuroda, who makes my soul burn hot and my blood run cold with fear; my editor who always helps me out; staffer Yoshida, who gives me energy and color; and all you readers who graciously picked up this book—my sincerest appreciation!

I hope to see you all in another volume!

KARIN
SUZURARA



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by Kenji Kuroda

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